

Song, Sexuality and the Hindi Film: Modernity and the Musical Body

**A Thesis Submitted During 2022 to the University of Hyderabad
in Partial Fulfilment of the Award of a Ph.D. Degree**

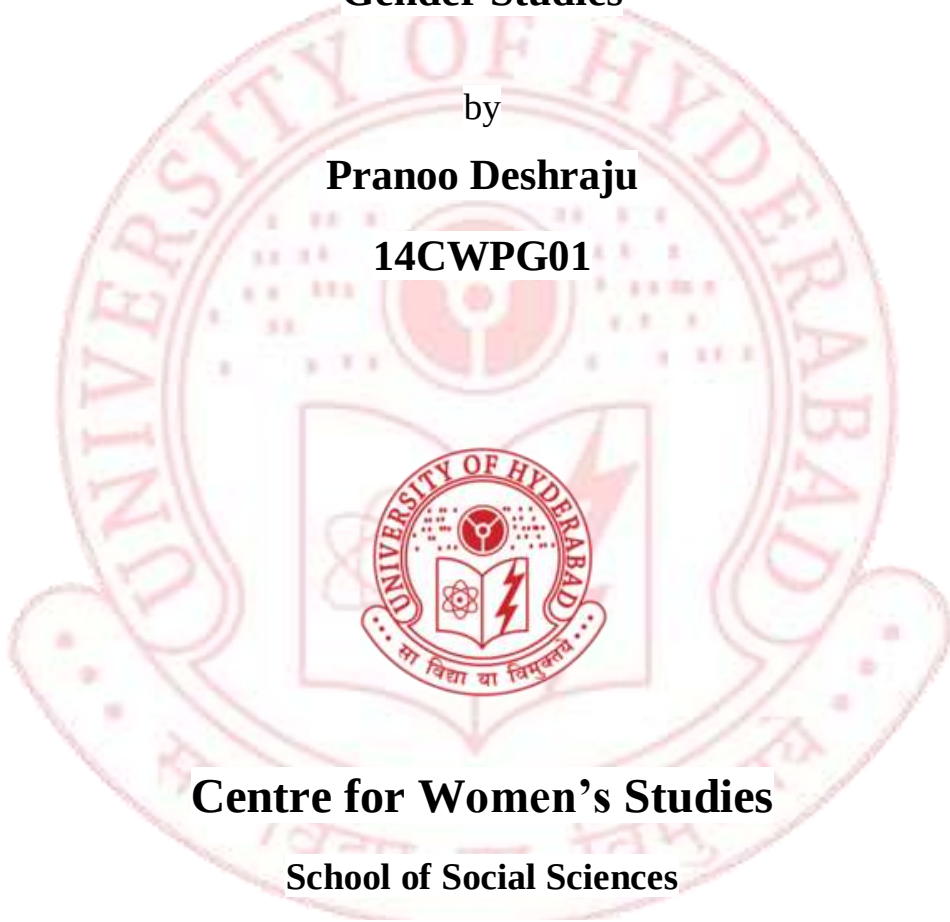
in

Gender Studies

by

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June 2022



Certificate

This is certify that the thesis entitled “**Song, Sexuality and the Hindi Film: Modernity and the Musical Body**” submitted by **Pranoo Deshraj** bearing Registration Number **14CWPG01** in partial fulfilment of the requirements for award of Doctor of Philosophy in **Gender Studies** from Centre for Women’s Studies, School of Social Sciences is a bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

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1. (co-authored with Prof. Pushpesh Kumar) No Place for the Obscene: Debates on the Playboy Club in South Asia, *Sexuality, Abjection and Queer Existence*, Routledge NY 2021. ISBN 9781138553149
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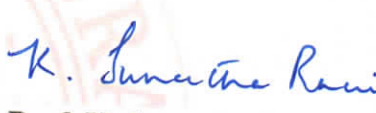
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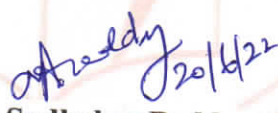
1. Presented a paper titled “Spaces of Play and Excess: Framing the Nightclub in/of the Cinematic City” in the Department of English on ‘Politics of Representation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives’ held at Sikkim University, Gangtok, Sikkim 1-3 November, 2017.
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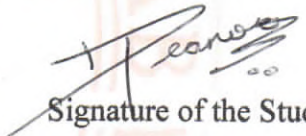

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Declaration

I, **Pranoo Deshraj**, hereby declare that this thesis entitled **“Song, Sexuality and Hindi Film: Modernity and the Musical Body”** submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of Prof. Pushpesh Kumar is a bonafide research work. I also declare that it has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma.

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Dedicated to my parents

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	xi
Introduction	1
Introduction	1
On Nation	8
On Song	11
Reconsidering Cinematic Sexuality: Theory and Methodology	16
Chapter Organisation	19
Popular Culture and Film: A Critique Of ‘National’ Cinema	25
Introduction	25
Section I: What is Popular Culture?.....	28
Defining the Popular	29
Defining Culture	31
Section II: Understanding Hindi Film	45
A Brief History of Hindi Film.....	45
Early Film Scholarship	54
The Writing of History: Hindi Film and the Nation-state	61
Defining the Hindi Film Song.....	83
Introduction	83
Section I: Hindi Film Song as ‘Popular Music’	90
Song as Difference: Hindi Film and the ‘West’	91
Cinema, Song and the National-popular	94
History of Film Song	98
Song-less Silent Cinema.....	98
Birth of Film Song	100
The Separation of the Voice-image: Singer-actor Split	105
Popularity and Distribution of the Hindi Film Song.....	107
The Recording Industry Emerges	107
Coming of Radio	108
Cassette Industry	110
Music Today.....	112
Conclusion.....	114

Section II: Understanding the Place of Music: Film, Narrative and Song	117
Introduction	121
Song as Para-narrative	123
Song as Production Number	123
Defining Narrative	124
Music and Image	127
The Song's Affective Charge	131
Conclusion	135
Song, Dance and Sexuality: A Critique of Old and New Approaches	139
Introduction	139
Section I: Gender and Nation	140
Introduction: Woman and Nation	141
Tradition and Modernity	145
Song, Dance and Sexuality: a history	147
Early Cinema: Dance and Respectability	147
Women of 'the Golden Age'	151
The Masala Form and the Continued Split	162
Section II: New Approaches to Song-dance and Sexuality	171
Star Theory as Method	172
Hindi Film Song and Stardom	181
Conclusion	189
Bodies and Sounds of Cabaret: Hindi Film Song and the Playscape	191
Introduction	191
Cinematic Cabaret and Colonial Anxiety	196
Section I: Cabaret as Bricolage	199
Introduction	199
Body in Space	206
Cabaret as Playscape	214
Section II: Micronarratives of desire	222
Mocking Male Desire	222
Simulated Seduction of Cabaret: The Erotic 'Musical Body'	227
New Sounds, New Bodies after Cabaret	238
The New Heroine	238
The New Bodies of Disco	244
Item Numbers	248

Conclusion	255
Conclusion	258
Selected Bibliography	274
Filmography	306
Discography.....	309

List of Figures

- Fig 1. Poster from the film *Alam Ara* (1931)
- Fig 2. Image of a sequence from *Kalpana* (1948)
- Fig 3. Image of a scene from *Sahib Biwi aur Ghulam* (1962)
- Fig 4. Filmfare cartoon, 1981
- Fig 5. Image of Helen in *Filmfare* 1981
- Fig 6. Cuckoo Moray in “Patli Kamar Hai”, *Barsaat* (1949)
- Fig 7. Geeta Bali in “Sharmaye Kahe”, *Baazi* (1951)
- Fig 8. Scene from “Piya Tu Ab Toh Aaja”, *Caravan* (1971)
- Fig 9. Image from “Huzurewala Jo Ho Ijaazat”, *Yeh Raat Phir Na Aayegi* (1966)
- Fig 10. Image from “Aa Jaane Jaa”, *Intaquam* (1969)
- Fig 11. Image from “Aaja O Mere Raja”, *Apna Desh* (1972)
- Fig 12. Image from “Meri Jawani Pyar Ko Tarse”, *Upaasna* (1971)
- Fig 13. Parveen Babi on the cover of *Filmfare*, 1981.
- Fig 14. Advertisement for *Disco Deewane* album

Introduction

Don't take it as a matter of course, but as a remarkable fact, that pictures and fictitious narratives give us pleasure, occupy our minds.¹

Introduction

Cinema is dubbed as “public fantasy.”² Of course, any work of fiction that involves imagination on part of the reader/audience, is a fantasy. But, aside from the fact that films are as a rule watched in theatres involving a public space, cinema can rightly be called a mode of public fantasy because, by virtue of their broad reach, their appeal and influence cover large numbers of people, as a result of which they can be said to pervade cultural consciousness. But this term is even more apt in the case of Hindi cinema—of course, it is true of all Indian cinema, but here we are concerned with Hindi cinema in particular—since there is an unselfconscious, unapologetic spirit in which Hindi films feel free to create worlds that have a palimpsest quality in which they reflect the real world but reinscribed with an imaginative universe that hardly resembles the day-to-day world. The average Hindi film indulges in song and dance, hyper-dramatic scenes and situations; it makes a montage of sober reality and a wistful world of hopes, dreams and aspirations; it does not hesitate to insert a song in an otherwise realist narrative, to fuse, in a bricolage manner, diverse elements of dialogue, music and dance into a captivating whole. A Hindi film can be an almost documentary like portrayal of social situations and the same time be a musical of sorts in which lyrical imagination is allowed to envelop reality. For this reason, some

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, Translated by G. E. M Anscombe, *Philosophical investigations*, US: Wiley Blackwell, 1st edition 1953, 4th edition 2009, para. 524.

² Priya Joshi, *Bollywood's India: A Public Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

people have called Hindi cinema a “cinema of interruptions.”³ Although it would perhaps be more accurate to describe it as a mosaic of disparate elements whose mutual incongruence is deftly moulded into an organic work that provides a unity of aesthetic experience.

Realist cinema depends on the absence of technological alienation a way of hiding the technological construction of filmic phantasm and reducing the distance between camera and spectator such that the spectator is already complicit and interpellated by a “hidden camera” that sustains voyeurism. In the theatre, or even, on tv, the subliminal enjoyment of the collective in concerts etc. is lost; the film seen in a dark theatre with its imposing screen and its all-encompassing ambience creates an experience of intimacy, of individuation, binding us in a visual-sonorous envelope.⁴ Hindi cinema could be characterised as a “cinema of attractions.”⁵ It holds together diverse narrative elements in a loose structure in the phantasmatic world of film. The fantasy of film is then sustained, enjoyed and made pleasurable rather than hidden. The pleasure of the camera thus lies not in the audience’s idea of being absent, not in remaining unseen, but as a mode of address which includes recognition and even enjoyment. Cinematic fantasy and the Hindi film form could be seen as akin to American musicals with their abrupt ‘breaks’ into song and dance.⁶ The synchronised image-sound has become a defining feature of the Hindi Film.

³ Lalitha Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2002).

⁴ See also Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema | SpringerLink’, in *Visual and Other Pleasures. Language, Discourse, Society*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19798-9_3; The term 'sonorous envelope' is borrowed from Michel Chion. See, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

⁵ Tom Gunning, ‘The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde’, in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 381–88, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46n09s.27>; Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*.

⁶ Richard Dyer, *In the Space of a Song: The Uses of Song in Film*, 1st edition (Routledge, 2013); Usha Iyer, ‘Film Dance, Female Stardom, and the Production of Gender in Popular Hindi Cinema’,

Despite the significance of the song, there is a propensity in film studies to subordinate sound to sight.⁷ While questions of representation, narrative structure and national/gender identity form a large body of work in the subject, music has occupied a rather marginal place in academic scholarship on cinema. Jacques Attali suggests that music is both “a mirror and a prophecy.” He further adds that “Music runs parallel to human society, is structured like it and changes when it does. It does not evolve in a linear fashion, but is caught up in the complexity and circularity of the movements of history.”⁸ His claim indicates the political economy of music as it inserts itself into society. The centrality of vision rests on positivist claims of sight as truth, an exploration of music in this sense is an attempt to address a more distracted, arbitrary engagement of ourselves to public life. As Gregory Booth has claimed, there is an integration of the economy of song and dance in Hindi film where one seems to supplement the other.⁹ Music has been one of the first mediated cultural forms with tremendous reach and distribution. Songs sell films in Hindi cinema. They are some of the most profitable components of a film and often influence the success of film. Recording sales are often some of the biggest selling points of a film.¹⁰ To understand musical cultures in Hindi film, it is necessary to see vision as concurrent with and not in a hierarchical relationship to sound.

In this thesis, the aim has been to imbricate sexuality and song to provide novel approaches to thinking about song and desire through an integration of music and image, including the various elements of dance, lyrics, movement and space. It

University of Pittsburgh ETD (University of Pittsburgh, 13 January 2015), <http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/22815/>.

⁷ Claudia Gorbman and Professor of Film Studies Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (BFI Pub., 1987).

⁸ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Manchester University Press, 1985), 10.

⁹ Gregory D. Booth, *Behind the Curtain: Making Music in Mumbai's Film Studios* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Booth, 30.

approaches the question by looking at the transition from cabaret to disco between 1950s and 1980s. This period marked a crucial shift in the representations of female body and desire in the Hindi film song. What began as the splitting of the traditional and modern dancing woman of cinema—through the heroine and cabaret dancer split—also formulated novel articulations on what is termed here as ‘micro-narratives of desire’ through its grammar of play. These elements were subdued with shifting contours of modernity and urban cosmopolitanism. If the 50s marked the split of the woman, the 70s and 80s marked its integration with the new heroine, and further its displacement with the body of the disco dancer who came to then embody this playscape. This period foretells the story of the ‘item number’ which has become part of the contemporary character of the Hindi film. As we will discuss in the chapter pertaining to this shift, the condensation of female desire in the figure of the cabaret dancer becomes diffused with the new bodies, sounds and spaces of the item song. This dispersion of the containment is not empty of context but rife with reference to socio-cultural shifts, in particular, as attitudes to the female body and respectability have changed.

What began in the 50s as the cabaret playscape morphed as modernity itself did through the introduction of the new sounds of disco. This period between the 50s to 80s has been greatly understudied in the discourse on Hindi cinema. A focus on grand claims of history, references to the compartmentalisation of history draws our attention away from the miniscule shifts that have informed the placement of the musical body, a concept elaborated on in the chapter on this transition. The musical body of the cabaret dancer is also the modern body, just as the body of the disco dancer heralded us into the new found consumptive modernity of the 80s and the coming of pop music brought in new images of the female body in the Hindi film

song. Pop music gave us a way to experience modern life, giving voice and image to the practices of consumption and cosmopolitan existence. The approach of this work is to understand this shift in new ideas of what it means to be modern. If the cabaret contained modernity without letting the threat of the modern female body bleed into the narrative, its foregrounding in the 70s and 80s cinema is illustrative of a new set of practices that entered public space. The so-called western bodies, and western songs of the cabaret now echoed through the aural-visual landscape of film. This shift was not sudden, just as history does not happen suddenly, through any clear series of events. Rather, a constellation of musical bodies moved in and out of the playscape providing us with glimpses into modernity.

Before moving on to our thesis, it seems only pertinent to define the term ‘cinema’ and ‘film’ and distinguish how different methods need to be deployed to understand them. By film text one could be referring to a number of things—it could be the production i.e., the making of the film which includes film technology, lighting, labour, financial investment, activities of the studio or production houses, including decisions about costume designing, set designing, cinematography etc. These questions refer to the way in which films were made, but they could also tell us about the way in which the market is understood and about the role of individual creativity as it is entangled with socio-cultural processes in the development of an art form. ‘Cinema’ is better described as an engagement with the medium, by which we mean the changes in distribution, in the way people consume it. While ‘film’ could mean the form and content—the style, the narrative, themes, genres, camera angles, use of lighting etc. Thus, the term ‘cinema’ extends to a study of production processes, the cinematic medium and film cultures—including viewership, distribution, the industry itself and so on, whereas ‘film’ refers primarily to the

‘text’—the narrative, form and content of the artistic product. This work is primarily concerned with film in the sense of textual representation. The study of the text is often treated as the study of image, this work asserts that we look not only the body on-screen but how the body is voiced, which voices and utterances become bound to which bodies and how. The dance sequence in particular foregrounds this connect between the body and voice in a singular representation converging the split of the singer and actor into the audio-visual narrative.

Gregory Booth and other scholars of song and dance have increasingly proposed to look at screen dance and the song as an extra-diegetic piece with an independent narrative structure. Elements of the film form do not necessarily lend themselves to narrative coherence but rather exist as independent elements, increasingly flowing in independent economies such that of the song/dance sequence which often precede the release of the film and could well determine the economic success of a film notwithstanding the reception of the film itself. This view helps us articulate the distinct space occupied by song. The excesses of song and dance, the melodramatic and repetitive mode of Hindi film allows for the reiteration and counter resurgence of concerns about the very nature of modernity in relation to social transformations. These interventions invite our attention to the complexity of the song-dance phenomena. In particular, the foregrounding of the female body invites a closer analysis of sexuality in this sequence. The screen dance, and the screened body are products of narratives of desire which are themselves bound with societal transformations that the changing perceptions of sexuality in popular imagination.

The flow of song in mediascapes and public spaces has always been a complex affair informed by global exchanges and this flow in public space is reforged through formal and informal modes of listening, singing and dancing—such as

dancing of the gathering in weddings, public dance shows or private performances. All of these transform the screen performance. Contributions on the Hindi film song are increasingly exploring this flow of the song across various spaces and media and are bringing to question our access to meaning through on-screen representation. These new explorations of the fragmentation of media require us to think anew the nature of interpretation of popular culture, if and how it can be 'known', if a common experience is to be found in our encounter with art. Another set of scholarship on song has extended the debate on nation, exploring the dynamic relationship of the song in terms of its star performances, aesthetics, its relationship to technology, labour and the state. Using the film song to understand the production of gender and sexuality in Hindi cinema and Indian popular culture, studies on Hindi song have uncovered relations between the various aspects of the film song—the stars, lyrics, vocals, editing, cinematography, choreography, organisation of scene and narrative. Despite efforts in this direction, there is a grave paucity of literature on the topic. Mapping its terrain, one encounters no more than a handful of names on the various elements of song, while there remains substantial output of early literature on the visual representation in the song sequence, particularly on the 'cabaret' and 'item number'—both cinematic elements that have become synonymous with the male gaze. The thesis argues for a closer observation of the micro-narratives of dance by paying attention to both the aural and visual aspects as they cohere in our interpretation of the Hindi film song.

This work considers the debates on cinema and as a cultural form and a commentary on society on Hindi film as it has evolved in relation to debates on sexuality, and particularly to foreground the relevance of song in the construction of sexuality. There has been a propensity to rely on the grand narrative of

compartmentalised history in accordance with a national history that has driven most of the discourse on gender in the Hindi film. There is a need for the discourse analysis of the scholarship that frames the representation on sexuality in Hindi film. The work observes that sexuality in Hindi film is seen to revolve around the conceptual pivot of the nation. It has been suggested by scholarship that the nation has played a primary role in the production of sexuality through the concept of resolution theory and its division of tradition and modernity. Commenting on this scholarship, the work suggests that the concepts of nation, sexuality and modernity in the Hindi film need further scrutiny. By arguing for the ephemeral and complex relationships that imbricate sexuality in the song sequence, this work argues that cinema and its audio-visual capacities allow for a greater range of—often contradictory—meanings. The cabaret dancer's body produces these multiple meanings that are part sexual and part playful. Her masquerading reveals a performative and affective dimension of sexuality in the Hindi film. The screened body of the cabaret dancer realises the emotive dimension of sexuality through the foregrounding of female bodies and their expressions of desire through song. The song sequence, thus, offers a route to think about the relation between body, screen and emotion, or pleasure. By suggesting that we consider how erotic appeal is generated by the cinematic production of sexuality, this work argues for the affectivity of erotica in the song dance sequence.

On Nation

The aesthetics of cinema in India is situated within social, political and economic considerations. Despite the multiplicities and contradictions of social formation, it has been suggested that the nation has hung over cinematic productions since the silent era, unceasingly present and demanding adherence to its codes. The

imaginative possibilities of cinema find themselves constrained by this discourse. Any conversation on Hindi cinema cannot escape the 'nation'. Whether it is the plotline, the characters, the stars, or its narrative elements, they are all bound by this premise. What this work sets out to do is to question these assumptions, to suggest that our understanding of cinema is skewed by these claims which limit our understanding of cinema in a dialectical relationship with society. This inductive leap not only leaves behind a great variety of films that are produced at any given time, it also presents us with a prefixed lens from which any other film is approached. A limited number of texts have become a reference point for the general understanding of the field and neologisms and intellectual acrobatics have sheltered these concepts from criticism. Apparently, there is no doubt that cinema has an ideological and function as a mirror as well as image to the nation, yet, as film audience, we ourselves experience the slippery set of references, metaphors and meanings that seem always beyond our reach. This becomes all the more important in our understanding of gender and sexuality given the contentions and objections over the female body on the screen. This reading might remind some of us of our own childhoods, spent watching Helen, enthralled by her movements and grace. It might remind us of the sequence in *Bombay Talkies* which showed a young boy dancing to and imitating an item song.

¹¹All of these scenes and experiences indicate the potential of cinema to reach beyond its intended meanings.

There is an inherent universality of cinema, its interpretation, its emotional value, its ability to move us, to make us fall in love with it like we fall in love with a language that we do not quite understand, but are lured by its melody nevertheless.

¹¹ Zoya Akhtar, Dibakar Banerjee, and Karan Johar, *Bombay Talkies*, Drama (Viacom18 Motion Pictures, 2013).

This is especially true of music which is rightly called “universal emotional language.”¹² Music enables “shared human emotions in addition to particular musical structures and forms that allow for transnational audiences to share symbolically in varying images of India.”¹³ Today, more than ever, this possibility has been realised. The availability of cinema from across the world on our private screens serves as a reminder that cinema is more than the sum of national politics. This is not to lapse into apolitical definitions of cinema but to suggest that the history of the nation-state does not determine nor completely explain how cinematic representations are shaped. Cinema is constitutive of and not a supplement to history. The multiplicity of meaning between the spectator and film cannot be captured by the prevailing discourse on film and national history. Given the slippage of the connotative meanings that films generate in the minds of the spectator, any such analysis that considers a somewhat cynical view of film as national ideology also presumes a position of authority that marks the author as a witness to the manipulations and distortions which the spectator consumes passively and is reconstructed or interpellated as a subject. They anchor the meaning of cinema to nation at the cost of exploring the expressions of emotions in film. Any analysis of film is bound to be incomplete, for the simple reason that there are innumerable ways of interpreting a film, innumerable ways in which it may touch us or simply entertain us. While cinema and its structure are built to elicit a certain response, that cannot possibly be the extent of its meaning. The semiotic range which it offers us could change not only according to who watches the film, but how, when or where. All of these miniscule details go into our reading the film. We must not

¹² Natalie Sarazzin, ‘Songs from the Heart: Musical Coding, Emotional Sentiment, and Transnational Sonic Identity in India’s Popular Film Music’, in *Global Bollywood*, ed. Anandam Kavoori and Aswin Punathambekar (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 217.

¹³ Natalie Sarazzin, ‘Songs from the Heart: Musical Coding, Emotional Sentiment, and Transnational Sonic Identity in India’s Popular Film Music’.

forget that music enhances and transforms the meaning of the image, and the study of film as pure image misses the interaction between the various sense experiences that are involved in our experience of the film as narrative.¹⁴

On Song

One of the many theories on the socio-economic relevance of music is that popular music operates in a “dialectic of economics and aesthetics.”¹⁵ While a limited set of people may have the ability and the training to distinguish between the purity of classical music and the hybridity of film music, it is also true that by way of sheer popularity, Hindi film music had made a definitive imprint on popular culture.¹⁶ It is often regarded as less sophisticated music which does not demand the same rigour from the artistes. Further, it is generally assumed that music will be kept formulaic to prevent economic loss and, and that it is enabled by mass media. This makes popular music typical of capitalistic society where cultural reproduction relies on mass distribution and standardisation. Cassettes, television, videos and today the internet all enable the dissemination of music on a large scale to a heterogenous audience.

This approach to popular music is complicated by the fact that it relies on a distinction between music in the market and one that is outside the market. But this is a flawed assumption, since all cultural products depend on their markets for their reproduction. Comparisons between art and popular culture that seek to distinguish artistic cinema from mass cinema often mystify the relationship of aesthetics as cultural production and politics. As Jameson suggests, both mass and high culture are

¹⁴ Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁵ Timothy Rice, ‘The Dialectic of Economics and Aesthetics in Bulgarian Music’, in *The Dialectic of Economics and Aesthetics in Bulgarian Music* (Duke University Press, 1996), 176–99, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822397885-011>.

¹⁶ Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

“objectively related and interdependent phenomena, as twin and inseparable forms of the fission of aesthetic production under capitalism.”¹⁷ The “binary system of values” that separate mass/ popular and high/refined culture “is replaced by a genuinely historical and dialectical approach to these phenomena.”¹⁸ This work further extends this idea by suggesting that the dialectic, which in Jameson’s imagination of the third-world is an allegory of the nation, fails to regard the social forces that influence and are influenced by cinema. Another related argument on popular music by Manuel states that the freedom of choice in the market is deceptive since goods reinforce an alienating, commodifying market system that eventually relies on constructing familiar and similar products. He uses the example of local songs to illustrate this. According to him, when local songs are mass produced in popular formats it leads to alienation of consumers from the otherwise ‘authentic’ and ‘original’ product. Gregory Booth concurs, commenting that Hindi cinema is “reluctant to add new instruments or alter the song form or structure in any appreciable way” and is thereby oriented towards standardisation.¹⁹

All of these views on popular music rely on its relationship with the market. To understand musical production is also to refer back to individual freedoms. The production of music is not the same as the production of a t-shirt. Cultural products operate by their own logic, and the popularity of a song relies not just in meeting expectations, but also in challenging them. Further, this argument is reminiscent of Theodore Adorno’s comments on Jazz which he considered superior music in which individuality was elevated in the process of challenging conformist musical styles.²⁰

¹⁷ Fredric Jameson, ‘Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture’, in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 9–34.

¹⁸ Fredric Jameson, ‘Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture’, *Social Text*, no. 1 (1979): 130, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466409>.

¹⁹ Booth, *Behind the Curtain*, 212.

²⁰ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1979).

This argument also assumes a binary between the creative and the commercial, where one can only be classified in a single category. But music defies this taxonomy since it is often both. A common link of all kinds of music today is their entrenchment in the economic structure; they are all part of the market and rely on commercialisation to some extent.

The earliest work on Hindi songs was written by Anna Morcom and Allison Arnold respectively. While Arnold did an ethnographic review on the enduring popularity of this music, Anna Morcom took an ethnomusicologist approach to highlight the formal and technical aspects of the music and thus show how Hindi film songs defy the distinctions of mass and high culture. Both these works are concerned with the nature of the ‘popular’ in a Gramscian cultural studies sense. This work resonates with the work of Peter Manuel who suggests that popular music is “the ground on which (social) transformations are worked.”²¹ The central question according to him is whether “popular music is ‘grassroot expression’ or ‘cultural hegemony.’”²² Another, not dissimilar approach to the study of Hindi film songs as popular music involves employing the binary of high/low culture and the dialectic struggle between the two. These works that function to establish or contend with the dichotomy of the popular and the ‘high’ cultural elements often encounter the obstructive reduction of the political valences of the popular into a celebration or derision of the same.

According to Beaster Jones, the intent of popular music is appeal. While it is true that it is often driven by profit, he suggests that “their memorability” can be more important than the sales. Popular film music draws on a multiple range of senses for

²¹ Peter Manuel, *Popular Music of the Non-Western World: A Historical Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 141.

²² Peter Manuel, *Popular Music of the Non-Western World: A Historical Survey*.

engagement—the dance, visuals, stars and popular film magazines—all of which form a network of cultural consumption of cinema.²³ Given the consumptive aspect of mass culture, Manuel suggests that the production of music by professionals alienates the listener who is seen as the passive consumer of culture rather than an active participant of its dynamic nature. Jones' comment on memorability and music comes into play here, since the listeners clearly dictate some aspect of cultural production. In order to be appealing and memorable, cultural production needs to keep the listeners' tastes in mind.

Following Jameson, there is a need to relocate the popular, in terms of its historical and dialectical relationship with the 'high' culture.²⁴ This distinction between the popular/ mass and the good/elite is remarked upon through Jayson Beaster Jones's distinction of beat and melody in popular Hindi film music wherein the 'beat' was denigrated as an inferior musical form, over melody which was seen to represent an authentic musical culture. As John Fiske suggests, *Disco Dancer*, the most popular film of this 'trend', was an opportunity for critics to address one another and discuss the film's merits, recalling the struggle to define and explain the popularity of a cultural phenomenon. The popularity of disco across the globe in the late 70s found its way through the economies of circulation and distribution into Hindi cinema. From the late 70s, the emergence of new composers meant that sound in Bollywood was changing. Often this is lamented over as the death of originality, and music in general, Mihir Bose in *Bollywood: A history* suggests that the 80s marked the end of the 'Golden Era of the Hindi Film Song'.²⁵ The popularity of music of the 70s is difficult to understand for most critics who are consistently comparing

²³ Jayson Beaster-Jones, 'Evergreens to Remixes: Hindi Film Songs and India's Popular Music Heritage', *Ethnomusicology* 53, no. 3 (2009): 425–48, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25653086>.

²⁴ Jameson, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture', 1979.

²⁵ Mihir Bose, *Bollywood: A History* (Roli Books Private Limited, 2008).

this musical form to an earlier ‘golden age of Hindi film songs’ with less ‘western’ influence. Populated by figures such as Mohammed Rafi, Lata Mangeshkar and S.D. Burman, this earlier musical phase has often been known as the age of Melody or the Golden Age of the Hindi Film Song. It is argued that 70s was a period of decline for film song in general; frequently dubbed, somewhat dramatically, as “the death of melody.”²⁶

Similar to the disco sound are the songs of cabaret which were often regarded vulgar and enjoyed less of a social repute than other film songs. Commenting on the broader side of the film song, Gupta writes: “Songs have an important climactic, orgasmic function as well, Indian cinema being the most erotic in the world behind its puritanical facade.”²⁷ The cabaret is an explosion of this erotica. Neepa Majumdar has suggested that the duality of singer/voice and actor/body is also a moral hierarchy with the dancer available for visual consumption.²⁸ Early cinema was particularly vulnerable to this phenomenon since the actors often came from ‘disreputable’ backgrounds, and public dancing itself was considered obscene. Mary Ann Doane, for instance, distinguishes between the voyeur and the eavesdropper.²⁹ The first is often associated with display of body, and hence, subjugation to the gaze, while the latter is seen as respectable.

Singers rarely acquire the disrepute that is preserved for dancers. Our theorisation of gender and dance needs to be attentive to and sceptical of these dichotomies that haunt most discussion on cinema. Further, songs need to be

²⁶ Rajiv Vijayakar, *The History of Indian Film Music: A Showcase of the Very Best in Hindi Cinema* (New Delhi: The Times Group Books, 2010).

²⁷ Chidananda Das Gupta, *The Painted Face: Studies in India's Popular Cinema* (Roli Books Private Limited, 1991), 67.

²⁸ Neepa Majumdar, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 173.

²⁹ M. A. Doane, ‘Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator’, *Screen* 23, no. 3–4 (1 September 1982): 74–88, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/23.3-4.74>.

considered not as pretexts for interruptive entertainment but also pay attention to the role they played and the characters with which they became associated. Often the role of the dancer is relegated to the status of the superfluous rather than acknowledged as integral to the narrative. Lata Mangeshkar is known for her refusal to sing cabaret songs, indicating the potent yet troubling sexuality of the cabaret. The cabaret was particularly berated for its sexual representations. Alternatively seen as an embodiment of the binary between the traditional and modern, or rather the good and bad woman, the dancer is considered to be the focal point of sexuality in a film. Given the denigrated status of the dancer, little attention has been paid to the ways in which this sexuality is expressed. Although research on music studies has increasingly looked at *mise-en-scene*, as well as the circulation, globalisation and the affective aesthetics of the film song, little has been said about the cabaret with reference to its affect. This work hopes to fill that gap.

Reconsidering Cinematic Sexuality: Theory and Methodology

Early scholarship on film sought to historicize film and understand its “psychic geography” as it spoke to the dreams and anxieties of the citizens.³⁰ According to this understanding, film is an interplay of the social and the psychic, that is to say, that film appeals to us on a psychological level even as it engages with issues of social relevance. It draws us into its world as a dream, a fantasy. Its visual appeal largely relies on the possibility of cinema to realise what would be impossible in one’s every day, material lives. Cinema in this sense is distinguished from reality.

Gupta writes that “the imminence of film song shared by all lifts its way above the bounds of realism required by particular films and gives it an autonomous,

³⁰ Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*.

transcendental presence in society”.³¹ This does not, however, mean that the pleasures of cinema are completely divorced from reality. Rather, it asserts that cinema through its psychic possibilities offers a window to the real. Later film scholarship beginning in the 90s onwards became focused on the political and ideological aspects of cinema. Cinema’s peculiar ability to give expression to our dreams and desires is also an active construction—it does not simply mirror or reflect our fantasies back to us but actively constructs them. The song too is considered to have an ideological dimension, and as Jones suggests, it often reflects its own temporality. This view will be argued against to indicate that song interpretation cannot be classified under the rubric of ‘periods’ and ‘eras’ that ephemeral and complex relationships imbricate sexuality in the song sequence. There is a further, equally important question regarding the construction of meaning at the interface of audience and screen. However, that is beyond the scope of this thesis.

By suggesting that we consider how erotic appeal is generated by the cinematic production of sexuality, this work suggests that the debate needs to move away from the concept of nation and of historicist readings, and instead look at the structure of the audio-visuals. As Ben Highmore suggests, “aesthetics is the study of the sensual insertion and immersion of bodily creatures in networks of material, sensate and affective force (which might be economic, political and so on).”³² Sequences which foreground the spectacle of the female body such as cabaret and item numbers also realize the emotiveness of sensuality. The song sequence, particularly the cabaret, offers us a way of thinking about the relation between body, screen and emotion, or pleasure.

³¹ Chidananda Das Gupta, *The Painted Face: Studies in India's Popular Cinema* (Roli Books, 1991).

³² Ben Highmore, *Cultural Feelings: Mood, Mediation and Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203130445>.

In this sense, song is an affective and a multi-layered text; it heightens feelings and expresses the emotional core of a film. The song is linked to the simultaneous memory of image and sound such that the image evokes the sound and the sound evokes its image.

Treating the cinema as sensorium, it is argued here that we think of song in terms of the affects and sensations that it arouses (for example: erotic relief, romance and nostalgia) and the contradictory set of meanings it offers through its various elements. The embodied affectivity of the female body in the sensorium also allows for a discussion on the body without recourse to the simplistic binaries of agency/defiance and subjugation/objectification.

Contemporary scholarship on Hindi film song ranges from the study of production to a study of the form. Instead of being disregarded, music is increasingly considered

an interdependent and complementary element of a film's narrative system. Music shares power to create meaning with a number of elements that come together to tell a story, among them mise-en-scene, cinematography, acting, editing, dialogue, and sound.³³

This work asserts that the cabaret also tells a certain story of female expressions of desire. By looking at the work through the perspective of sound, dance and cinema studies, it imagines a site for the study of cinema based on its various affects. This work should be of interest to scholars working in the field of gender studies, film studies as well as the related domains of film music studies.

³³ Kathryn Kalinak, *Film Music: A Very Short Introduction*, *Film Music: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press), 18, accessed 2 December 2021, <https://www.veryshortintroductions.com/view/10.1093/actrade/9780195370874.001.0001/acrade-9780195370874>.

Chapter Organisation

This thesis begins with an analysis of how the field of Hindi film studies has been understood. The first chapter lays out the main concerns in its study and provides a critical commentary on some of the central concerns of the Hindi film such as history of film and its relationship to the idea of national cinema. It goes on to argue that national cinema has become a myopic lens through which to study film, and in the following chapter, we will explore how song-dance in particular have a much more complex relationship to this question. Hindi cinema has been often studied as the antithetical form of Hollywood realist cinema, governed by fantasy and incredulity as opposed to the films of the ‘west’. In particular, the Hindi film is largely understood as “melodrama.” Another closely related dominant trend in Hindi cinema studies is the study of the Hindi film as “national imaginary.” Both of these concepts that govern the discourse reinstate the ‘nation’ as the primary axis for the study of Hindi film. Yet, as is argued here, there is little clarity on what constitutes Indian cinema and how Hindi film comes to stage conflicts of the nation-state. The idea of Hindi cinema as Indian cinema or even as the primary cinema is misleading and ethnocentric. The second pervading notion is that of the ‘popular’. Taking its cue from cultural studies and the study of popular culture as a manifestation of state processes and ideologies, the study of Hindi film as popular culture beguiles scholars into making false unities of an untameable, multi-headed medium. This chapter questions these two central claims that drive the project of popular culture studies, and particularly film studies. It begins with an exposition on popular culture as it defines the backdrop against which cinema studies has acquired its tools.

The second chapter is on song, its beginnings and technological developments with specific arguments on Hindi film form and song-dance. Beginning with an

articulation of the nascent view of song and dance as a disruption of the narrative, where song could easily be understood as an additive to and incidental to narrative, this chapter first explores the history of the Hindi film song and its place in antecedent performance traditions where they played a crucial role in story-telling. In the beginning, film evolved from theatre and its mode of oral story-telling. Since the talkie became possible, songs were important to hold and sustain interest of the audience. In addition, they also furthered the narrative, and constituted an important part of the spectacle. The songs of this period were sung by the actors generally; since synchronisation of sound and film, and the possibility of playback had not come about yet. Slowly, synchronisation led to the burgeoning of singers, splitting the singer-actor into separate figures of singers and actors. At the same time, the prevalence of song in the Hindi film led scholars to comment that the song was either a distraction or a bursting forth of emotion. It was realised that song was both internal and external to narrative. In this chapter, we discuss whether this relationship to narrative is as simple as it appears. It is suggested that there are different kinds of occasions within film, and a number of possible relations between the song and the film narrative.

The song in Hindi cinema needs to be understood as an integrated form that emerged out of theatre rather than being seen as a mere “attraction” inserted gratuitously into a speech narrative. This theory of song as filmic ‘attraction’ is in fact derogatory as it depends on a comparison between different cinematic forms—Hindi cinema on the one hand and other film industries on the other. The second chapter extends this argument further to the study of song-dance as narrative “interruption.” In this sense, it proposes that song and dance perform several functions from incidental or entertaining insertions, from interruptions, to bringing meaning to the

narrative, either furthering the plot, or in setting the mood of the situation or evoking the emotional world of the characters.

Secondly, taking its cue from the first chapter, the work explores the trends in song-dance studies in Hindi film that once again, conflate popularity with national ideology. It first interrogates the manner in which the concept of ‘nation’ is invoked as a conceptual lynchpin for Hindi film studies. Booth’s argument on the film song as “national-popular” music is critiqued to suggest that while one may regard Hindi film songs as popular music, the idea that songs are necessarily indicative of anything national depends on a confusion regarding what constitutes ‘national’. First, such comparisons are entrenched in colonial assumptions on which the comparison is predicated. Secondly, it is argued that, as the previous chapter suggests, the term ‘national cinema’ itself requires close attention and further interrogation. This chapter also elaborates on the technological processes which enabled distribution making the Hindi film song popular.

It also provides a closer scrutiny of the role of song in Hindi film. It briefly discusses the relationship between song and narrative in order to understand the place of the Hindi film song in the grander landscape of cinematic desire, and to further broaden the varied relationships that songs share with the film narrative. This brief chapter territorialises the Hindi film song within the background of its cinema. It explores the relationship between song and image, i.e., song picturisation to assert that the two are calibrated in order to produce the audio-visual text of song. The predominance of visual analysis is critiqued. In the final section, it is argued that songs create “waves of tension” in an otherwise monotone narrative.³⁴ The pleasure of film in Hindi cinema lies to a very significant extent in this emotional arrest. It brings

³⁴ Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*.

the film and the spectator closer through its affective explosion of senses—its colours, lyrics, tonality, movement and star all forming a constellation to immerse the spectator into the pleasures of cinema.

The next chapter studies the dominant concepts that have influenced the approaches to female sexuality and the Hindi film. Following from the first chapter on Hindi cinema and the nation, it critiques the notion that female body in cinema is necessarily a reference to the nation. The conflation of sexuality and ideology in the study of Hindi film exclusively as a site of national-ideological struggle draws on the now-classic formulation of the ‘new woman’ proposed by Partha Chatterjee.³⁵ This chapter explores the changing perceptions of sexuality to suggest that the dichotomy blinds us to the multifarious representations of sexuality and desire in the Hindi film and the gradations of sexuality that we see in various films, sometimes even within the same film. For one, this relationship belittles the symbolism of the many women that inhabit the screen, even if they do not take central stage. This includes not just the vamp but the other ancillary characters as well. As the previous chapter argues, the nation and the popular are both tenuous categories imposed upon the Hindi film. In the same vein, this chapter argues that female sexuality and the female body in the Hindi film also take many forms which cannot be clubbed into a monolithic, monochrome category. The chapter also gives the reader a sense of the landscape of representation of women in song-dance from the early debates on respectability to the emergence of the modern woman in the cabaret sequence.

The fourth chapter looks at the ‘dancing woman’ in cabaret to argue that once again, the discussion on nation which is invoked to study these figures is inadequate if

³⁵ Partha Chatterjee, ‘The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question (1989)’, in *Empire and Nation*, Selected Essays (Columbia University Press, 2010), 116–35, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/chat15220.10>.

not flawed, and does not offer a sufficient or even plausible interpretation for understanding gender in song and dance. They are often conflated as examples of the perverse sexualisation of the female body in film. Looking at cabaret numbers and films on cabaret dancers, the thesis asserts that within cinema, the cabaret has had a shifting, but definitive relationship with desire. The cabaret provides an alternative space for thinking about modernity within cinema in terms of its sounds and bodies. The concept of playscape is a helpful tool to understand this engagement between the body, desire and song in cabaret as it helps rewrite the narrative of disparaging modernity towards a more playful fluidity of the modern body. It further argues that the erotic potentiality of the cabaret in many ways captures the entire potentiality of the female body—as danger, as play and as masquerade. This provides a methodological framework to understand song and sexuality in the cabaret performance where erotica becomes possible as a series of sensations written into the song. Here, the author develops the notion of the musical body, the on-screen manifestation of sound. The Hindi film song in particular is often reduced to a spectacle of female sexuality catering to the male gaze. This work on the other hand looks at the interplay of subjugation and transgression in such song sequences in the light of the previous argument proposing instead an interactive approach to account for the multiplicity of meanings in the song-text, as it brings together the aural and the visual for the vicarious, affective pleasure of the audience. The visuals, production and sounds all contribute to the pleasures and meaning of the film text and narrative.

The final chapter extends the themes of sounds and visuals of cabaret as playscape to think about the emerging sounds of pop and disco as executed through the bodies of the new heroine and new heroes of the 80s. It is argued here that there is a displacement of desire within this framework as new articulations of modernity

made possible fresh relationships with sounds and bodies in Hindi cinema. The notion of the playscape established in the previous chapter is applied to these new musical bodies as they speak a new language of desire and replace the potent and defiant female desire of the cabaret dancer with an appropriated image of subdued, and finally, displaced desire. The coming of the disco dancer bespeaks this new image of the playscape, and by extension, of modernity. Finally, the chapter extends the relationship between the cabaret to argue that in the case of the so-called item number, there is a breakdown of the already unstructured cabaret sequence and a reorientation of sexuality through the new channels and spaces available on and off the screen. The dancer body of the 'item number' transgressed the nightclub space that the cabaret dancer inhabits and her dance and sound vocabulary are adaptive and ever-changing, lacking space that marks the movements and sounds of the cabaret sequence. The work concludes that sexuality in the Hindi film sequence needs a closer analysis of the various expressions of voice, lyrics, dance, body and music since they often form an affective sensorium that pulls the audience into its world and generates visceral enjoyment. The cabaret is an important site for our expansion of the understanding of sexuality in Hindi film beyond the discourse on nation and sexuality. Its transition from the 50s, and finally the contemporary item number offers a space for the articulation of desire bound with modernity but also in excess of its ideological entrapment. They present a desiring complex made up of bodies, sounds, society and spaces that needs closer attention than discussions on the visual representations female body alone.

Popular Culture and Film: A Critique

Introduction

Certain presuppositions frame a significant amount of scholarship on Hindi Film. It has been defined as a “melodramatic form”; a fantasy composed of a “constellation of interruptions” that generate audience pleasure through their excessiveness.¹ As a “cinema of attractions” the cultural aesthetics of Indian films has been distinguished from filmmaking in other parts of the world.² Often pejoratively known as ‘masala’ film in common parlance, commercial Hindi cinema is supposed to be given to sacrificing creative and novel plots for a predictable plot comprising a mix of action, tragedy, romance and suspense, creating heightened emotional tension. The driving motive of Hindi cinema is seen as a purely or even crassly commercial interest to ensure which the films followed certain well-trodden conventions that were known to make a film popular. As opposed to the creative exploration of what is considered ‘art’ cinema, popular cinema is condemned for being standardised/stereotypical and formulaic.

The division between commercial and parallel cinema which demonstrates the division between popular practices that are considered inferior and high art which is supposed to appeal to the most refined sensibilities, has been frequently disproven by the appeal of directors such as Bimal Roy and Guru Dutt whose films maintained a steady popularity while being artistically phenomenal. Despite this confusing

¹ Ravi Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-11812-6>; Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*.

² Gunning, ‘The Cinema of Attraction[s]’; Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*.

distinction between parallel and commercial cinema, there has been a standard discourse on the superiority of parallel cinema. In the Indian Cinematograph Report of 1969, there is a general lament on the state of commercial cinema, the poverty of artistic cinema and the desire to promote the aesthetic development of film through subsidies. The popularity of films was recognised by the Indian state when, on the recommendation of the SK Patil committee, it set up the Film Finance Corporation in 1960. This thrust a new spate of independent directors into the foreground and inaugurated the 'parallel cinema' movement.³ This policy shift has been touted as the moment of the emergence of a 'parallel cinema' movement. The movement also saw the making of popular films with socio-political concerns that were aesthetically different from commercially viable cinema: the films were subdued in their tenor and were in a sharp contrast to the depiction of the lives of the rich, and that of the rich-poor divide seen in commercially popular films. They highlighted casteism, sexism and social discrimination in Indian society and were politically conscious, using the cinematic medium as a tool for reform and social transformation. This could only be said to last briefly since by the late 70s these topical films became a standard trope within Hindi films.

The division of cinematic practices into high/low art, and of films as either 'artistic' or 'aesthetically worthless' relies on a simplistic omission of a substantial number of films that cannot be assimilated into either category. It is this division that becomes the site for depicting the ideological aspects of culture. It has motivated an output of literature on the status of Hindi commercial cinema where it has become entangled in the high/low culture debates in an attempt to define it and justify its

³ Bhaskar, Ira, 'The Indian New Wave', in *A Handbook of Indian Cinemas*, ed. K Moti Gokulsing and Dissanayake Wimal (London: Routledge, 2013).

study as an academic discipline. Some discourses committed themselves to the study of cinema as an art form, while some other discourses studies cinema only because it was putatively a strand in popular culture.

Chakravarty suggests that cinema is often regarded as an “impersonating, debased and parasitic form.”⁴ Reflective of this attitude are expressions that describe Hindi cinema as a jumble of unoriginal, borrowed plotlines and sounds, of inferior acting and exaggerated sentiment that appeals to a ‘lower’ class of audience which enjoys this exuberant display of Manichean conflict, through the contorted, larger than life expressions and stock characters in an on-screen puerile spectacle. This disparaging attitude is also commented upon by Madhava Prasad who suggests that the lack of attention to Hindi cinema can be attributed to the perception that it is “not-yet cinema.”⁵ For most scholars, this division is twofold, one being the comparison of Hindi commercial cinema to Art/ Parallel/ independent cinema, and the other being the comparison between Hindi commercial films and international films, particularly—ironically enough—Hollywood. This confirmation of post-colonial difference that is the foundation for much conversation around Hindi films needs serious reconsideration. These approaches treat popular culture of the ‘third-world’ i.e., of the post-colonial nation as forever shaped by its past, fateful history. Another important strand in this approach is that films, like other cultural practices, are treated as an ideological battlefield. Culture is understood as being inlaid with political meanings at every turn. Its aesthetic style i.e., the form, as well as the content, and its reception and practice are all carefully analysed for their ideological subtexts. Such

⁴ Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987* (Austin, Tex: University of Texas Press, 1993), 5.

⁵ Madiraju Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, 1st ed., Oxford India Paperbacks (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

readings tend to generalize the complex engagement of cinema with society by imprisoning a complex dynamic within the binaries of resistance and conformism, thereby replacing the aesthetic pleasures of the text with a political dimension that inhabits the dichotomy of the state and the people. In this section, we attempt to define the meaning of popular culture by understanding to what it refers and its relationship to ideology under which its academic study is frequently justified.

Section I: What is Popular Culture?

There are many meanings and definitions of popular culture as theorists have tried to understand the role of popular culture and its relationship to society. Cultural studies asserts that popular culture is inherently ideological. It strives towards an analysis of popular cultural practices while assuming a reciprocal causality between culture and society. Popular culture is often treated as a distortion and mystification of social hierarchy and oppression on one hand, and as an authentic expression of a people's culture on the other. The arguments on the definition of culture reveal the difficulty in its characterisation and the pitfalls associated with assuming the neutrality of its meaning, its expressions, its value as a marker of social status and individual creativity. Culture treated either as an ahistorical practice, or as one determined by its history conceals the dialectical relationship between culture and society. Popular culture, by virtue of its mass appeal allows for an analysis of cultural practices that are shared by a larger community of people, but it is neither defined by that community nor defines it. To be intelligible and enjoyable to a group of people, popular culture also follows a certain language; it is involved in the production of meaning to be understood by a group. But this relationship between the signifying practices of film and society is more complex than that of written language. Being a

visual medium, cinema allows for a degree of transcendental translation; the text can be followed to a degree without necessary recourse to being an insider to that culture. This crucial difference between cinema as popular culture and other cultural artefacts reveals the need to develop an appropriate set of tools to understand cinema as popular culture and its relationship to socio-political, ideological edifices of the state and imagined communities.

Defining the Popular

The common-sensical meaning of popular culture is simply that which is consumed by and enjoyed by many people.⁶ It is also defined commonly as that which is commercial i.e., typical of the market and made solely for profit-making as against artistic ambition. It is also defined in terms of its sheer popularity. In other words, it is assumed that the success of a particular film or a particular genre of films (although genre fidelity is not a guarantee of its success) is a matter catering to the lowest common denominator of taste. Such a meaning relies on a purely quantitative understanding of the term. Apart from the understanding of the popular in terms of its commercial success or general appeal, popular culture is also understood as ‘authentic culture’ or ‘the culture of the people’ as opposed to high culture which is the conspicuous consumption of the elite.⁷ This definition also re-creates the dichotomy between popular and high culture, though in a positive sense. Popular culture describes the lived practices of the masses; their organic existence, insulated from socio-political and concomitant relations of power. This meaning foregrounds the culture of the people, their practices. This view is critical of the assumption that culture is part of the “superstructure”: there exist cultural practices that are borne of

⁶ John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (UK: Pearson, 2009), 5.

⁷ John Storey, 6.

the community, and are not merely contraptions for the mystification of social hierarchies and the interrelations of power.

Both definitions tend to think of popular culture in the singular, as a monolithic and unchanging term that can be stretched to understand all cultural forms that remain a “residual” category distinguished mainly from the “dominant” culture of the elite.⁸ It is also often used as synonymous with ‘mass culture’. In this sense of the term, popular culture is understood as a set of ‘inferior’ cultural practices, distinguished from high culture. It must be noted that in such contexts the very term ‘masses’ is normative, rather than descriptive. The distinction between high art or art cinema and popular commercial cinema, for instance is a case of such usage. This is of course beset with several difficulties. For one, such a binary ignores shifts which are both diachronic as well as synchronic. These definitions assume that popular culture is fixed in time and place, while the fact is that culture can and does spread across regions and communities, and it also evolves and changes its forms.

What is understood as high culture could come to be embraced by the masses and lose its high cultural status, the same cultural practices may co-exist in both domains or the practices may change their form and modalities as they percolate in time to other classes. What is enjoyed as high culture may be seen by the aspirational middle-classes as desirable, compelling mass production which once again metamorphoses from high culture to popular, blurring those distinctions. The meaning of term, or how it is applied to different cultural practices is unstable and is always predicated on the usage of the term rather than as a self-evident, immutable category.

⁸ Raymond Williams, "Dominant, Residual and Emergent" Art Theory, accessed 23 April 2022, <https://theoria.art-zoo.com/dominant-residual-and-emergent-raymond-williams/>.

Defining Culture

To better understand the points made above, we must retrace our steps and begin by defining the term ‘culture’. As John Storey points out, the term is “an empty conceptual category” that changes meaning based on the subject under scrutiny or the theoretical background of the project.⁹ It may be worth detailing John Storey’s views in this context since they provide a point of departure for any discussion of popular culture and related phenomena.

Storey summarizes three definitions of culture provided by Raymond Williams. In its broadest sense, culture is how people live and organise their lives—ranging from what they eat, what they watch, how they mourn or celebrate—it refers to the entirety of the people’s social practices and systems of belief that underlie these practices. It is this definition which Raymond Williams speaks of when he defines culture as “way of life of a people, period or a group.”¹ This definition which is common in our vocabulary is complex, and often incomplete; seemingly descriptive, this definition also solidifies certain practices as the property of a specific group. The identity of certain groups and people become synonymous with certain cultural practices. Here, we run into another problem, if we think of identity as fluid and ever-evolving, we can see that communities and people also adopt and participate in various cultures at the same time depending on the context. Our cultural affinity adapts to the situation at hand such that to isolate practices is no longer a descriptive category, but constructs the culture that it seeks to define.

⁹ John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, 1.

Culture can also refer to a sense of refinement. When we refer to someone as cultured, we mean that they inhabit a sensibility and understanding of cultural artefacts that belong in the domain of ‘high’ culture. Matthew Arnold defines culture as “the best that is thought and said in the world.”¹ It implicitly sets itself in opposition to the culture of the people. It privileges select cultural artefacts and practices while alienating others and assigning them an inferior status. The premise precludes an idea of culture that shapes canonical cultural practices to distinguish it from culture as lived practices. Culture becomes synonymous with “intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development.”¹ The final definition and one which is most relevant for our work is that of culture as “signifying practices” that are engaged in the production of meaning.¹⁰

The classical Marxist model of social organization divides society in terms of base-superstructure. The base comprises of the economic modes of production while the superstructure refers to the socio-political and cultural makeup of society that govern and naturalises the relations of production. The model presumes that modes of production determine culture, religion and science i.e., it is the base that determines the superstructure. Culture does not simply reproduce economic relations, but has an important role to play in consolidating said relations, and justifying the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeois. The worker lives in a state of ‘false consciousness’. As Marx states “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.”¹¹ The economic base deceives the masses into the acceptance and naturalisation of capitalist society

¹⁰ Cf. Bourdieu on taste; Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, 15th ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).

¹¹ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1859.
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>

and justifies the class relations between the proletariat and bourgeois, forgoing the possibility of class struggle and revolt. It curtails the possibility of a revolution that overthrows the power-bloc.

Revisions to this model critique this cause-effect relationship and instead posit that the superstructure has a dialectical relationship to political economy. They suggest that culture is not merely an effect of the economic base but plays an important, determining role in the production of the economic base. It also means that culture is not apolitical, or neutral but is determined by political economy—it has a social, political, economic role to play in the naturalization of the division of classes into capitalist and workers. The two speak to and transform one another. Culture is dialectical, and is not merely an effect of economy but also influences its production. Cultural studies take its cues from this conceptual model to understand how culture shapes and is shaped by socio-political economy. The study of popular culture in this sense is the study of the relationship between cultural practices and the hierarchies that normalize social organization.

Adorno came from a school of thought which saw popular culture as an agent of distortion of power relations for the masses, the enjoyment of popular culture producing a soothing subjugation of the audience. His theory of song made a distinction between different musical idioms and the affect they produce on the masses. His work implicitly preferred classical music, marking this artefact of high culture as of artistic value while popular music was defined by monotony and conformity. The negative connotations of the term ‘mass culture’ are more explicit in Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s essay on “culture industry.”¹² Exploring

¹² Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’, in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, trans. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1993), 31–41.

musical practices and cultural artefacts in an industrialised society, they observe that the industrialisation of culture reproduces a standardised, uniform culture with wide appeal which relies on the logic of mass production. According to them, classical music heightens individual creativity while jazz destroys it.¹³ The standardisation of products is a necessary consequence of this model which, according to them, suppresses the creative and cathartic power of culture; it replaces authentic pleasure and authenticity of the work of art with a drab uniformity. They also suggest that as a standardised project, the culture industry is a monolith that vulgarises art, and compare it to “genuine happiness and jest which is denied by the market and surrogated.”¹⁴ Products carry the “same stamp...as a whole and in every part.”¹⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer mourn the industrialisation of culture as the death of individuality and as evidence of the power difference between the elite who own the means of production, and the consumer who often does not have access to these means. The lack of variety in technological products was a result of it being controlled by a select few.

The Culture Industry. Adorno and Horkheimer follow in the tradition of Marxist scepticism towards culture, considering it as part of the superstructure. Produced by the hierarchy that forms the economic base of society—the exploitation of the proletariat and the exploitative bourgeois, culture is a form of ‘false consciousness’. It is economic hierarchy that dictates cultural production and subsumes consumer behaviour.¹⁶ The being, the consciousness of man is shaped by

¹³ In another text, ‘On Jazz’, Adorno follows the distinction between classical music and jazz elevating the former to the status of art while marking the latter as ‘amalgam of a destroyed subjectivity and of the social power which produces it, eliminates it, and objectifies it through this elimination.’ Theodor W. Adorno and Jamie Owen Daniel, ‘On Jazz’, *Discourse* 12, no. 1 (Fall Winter 1989-90): 67.

¹⁴ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’.

¹⁵ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.

¹⁶ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.

the act of consumption, but more importantly, culture tells us who we are, consciousness is a one-way street that flows from the hierarchy of the economic base to the individual who is ideologically indoctrinated to accept his oppression. “Culture industry as a whole has moulded men as a type unfailingly reproduced in every product.”¹⁷ Culture mystifies the conditions of production and the power relations that sustain it. The economic base—the modes of production and the relations of production determine culture whose purpose is to perpetuate the values of the bourgeois and maintain their rule. Any subjective feeling of individuality is dismissed as an illusion, a ‘pseudo’ phenomenon. As their essay argues, the common man was, while “seemingly free, he was actually the product of its economic and social apparatus.”¹⁸ It is the economically powerful that own technological means of production in the post-industrialised society, which gives them the power to control the content and direct them towards perpetuating their own ‘false consciousness’ among the proletariat. Culture is a propaganda machine that reproduces the ideology of the bourgeois.

The concept of culture industry has been, as indicated above, widely critiqued as it does not acknowledge how culture can also affect modes of production and thereby transform the conditions of production. Further, the concept also retains the binary of high and low culture treating standardised products as inferior to works of art. In the case of post-industrialised society, low culture is that which lacks any creative potential and is produced for the market with the intent of attracting an audience unlike the creative urge that marks the unique signature of art outside of the cultural industry. This distinction isn’t unlike the distinction made between parallel or

¹⁷ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.

¹⁸ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.

Indian new wave and commercial popular cinema. The products of mass culture are passively consumed by a philistine audience that depends on the falsehood of individual identity while consuming mass products. For instance, they say,

The sound film, far surpassing the theater illusion, leaves no room for imagination or action on the part of the audience, who is to respond within the structure of the film yet deviate from its precise detail, without losing the thread of the story; hence the film forces its victims to equate it directly with reality.¹⁹

The cathartic power of cinema is merely a means to dull critical thought and revolt. It is as though the audience has no sense that this is fantasy and cannot even differentiate reality from fiction. Adorno and Horkheimer's comment on the nature of cinema and its influence on audiences' is not unlike many other suppositions that tend to read meaning into the film text. These assertions claim that film texts are self-contained and that meaning is transmitted from the film to the audience in a linear, hierarchical manner in which the audience is influenced by cinema, but not the other way round. When we consider the relationship of Hindi cinema to its audience, a similar quandary emerges. Claims of a state apparatus governing cinema is faced with the problem of audience agency, wherein, though the images set limits on possible meanings, a variety of meanings becomes possible.

Art consumer and loss of individuation. For the Frankfurt school, the popularity of mass culture is itself suspect. Mass culture becomes popular not through audience tastes, but rather the tastes themselves are produced as "part of the system and not an excuse for it."²⁰ Culture industry produces popularity; it acts upon the desire of the consumers. Audiences' desire does not constitute an external force, the

¹⁹ Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, 120–67.

²⁰ Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*.

market does not simply produce what the audience wants, rather the pleasure of the audience from commodities is produced by the market itself. The hierarchy of low and high culture classifies the consumer, not the commodity she consumes. This theory of oblivious determination preceding the appearance of choice leaves no room for being critiqued or falsified; one cannot take recourse to the meaning of popular culture as what people authentically and spontaneously like. It is impossible to falsify the argument that mass culture is the culture of the bourgeois as their consciousness is already an effect of this hierarchy. It is an approach in which there can be no counter evidence because it is already assumed that such evidence is the product of a falsehood or delusion. Therefore, the definition of popular culture cannot be explained through quantitative analysis, or a reliance on what the audience considers popular.

In these assertions lie the slippery concepts of classical Marxism and the later concept of ‘false consciousness’. It universalises the object as well as the consumer—none of them are left with identity except as products and subjects of the economic apparatus. The masses are imagined as singular, as though they are a single organism sharing one giant brain, a single consciousness. This leaves no room for us to think about the struggles within this base-superstructure and distortion-domination model. We are forced to imagine that the consumer has no identity outside of the products consumed and that their identity has no impact on the commodities or the market. It is as though one is watching a film, but as a passive, unquestioning viewer on whom film leaves an imprint but who cannot possibly engage with the film, even to the extent of having an individual view about it. The viewer has no discernment, no individuality and has lost the sense of value of art, having been smothered in the trappings of mass culture.

Walter Benjamin's article provides a helpful rejoinder to the disparaging view on the standardisation of products in post-industrial society. He claims that the work of art has lost its 'aura' since the authenticity is no longer valuable—even ascribed values such as tradition and uniqueness of products are gone with the possibility of reproducing and manipulating the work of art.²¹ Mechanical reproduction plucks products from their aura and status as high art and makes it possible to have the same in one's living room, it brings the consumer and the product closer. By making standardisation possible, the products also fill part of the gap between the culture of the elite, the bourgeois, and that of other classes to whom it has now become accessible as a copy. Benjamin's argument is more cautious in its approach to the relationship between the market, the goods and the consumer. Rather than assigning a transformative value to the consumer, Benjamin is more concerned with the status of the work of art rather than its production. Another important debate he initiates is that concerning "historical objects."²² Adorno tends to take the view that standardised objects are inferior to certain elevated works of art, but Benjamin raises the fundamental question as to how history is defined and how relevance is assigned to works of art in the name of tradition which in turn is used to exemplify works of art that are held in high regard and considered valuable to an era or group of people. Loss of aura of the work of art is an appropriation and stripping away of its history. Politics is another mode of foregrounding works of art. Benjamin reverses the proposition of culture industry to suggest that the politics lies in what objects are chosen, are bestowed with reverence and have aura; it is in the binary of high/low culture where ideology resides. He suggests a new division for cultural works, replacing the

²¹ Walter Benjamin and Michael W. Jennings, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility [First Version],' *Grey Room*, no. 39 (2010): 11–38, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27809424>.

²² Benjamin and Jennings

high/low binary with approaching a work as having cult value or exhibition value thereby defining it in relation to the market.

Benjamin's work also helps us see that all cultural products are after all in the market and can be studied in relation to it. The question to ask is if there is any 'other' to the culture industry, if there are products which do not conform to the whims of the market. Whether it is works of 'high' art that hang in galleries, or posters that one finds on the pavements, they both rely on the industry for their production directly or indirectly. The exalted status given to certain works of art is closely linked to an earlier sense of culture that distinguishes itself from mass culture and popular culture. Both these approaches emerge from the post-industrial society where the consumption and distribution patterns were changing with technological evolution as well as the proliferation of the middle classes. What is relevant for us is that they suggest two different, though not entirely opposite approaches to culture. The former is a classical view that degrades mass culture as distortion of reality and imagines the people as a mass that is unaware of their real condition, while the latter is a more favourable approach to popular culture. Benjamin reimagines the binary and the hierarchical difference between high and low culture by turning our gaze towards the market. His reattribution of cultural works as cult or exhibition can help us trace patterns in the market to understand the popularity of the works sans judgement on their status as art. These insights, as we will see, are of enormous help when we try to understand the status and function of commercial cinema.

Culture As Battlefield. According to Stuart Hall, the critique of popular culture oscillates around "pure autonomy" and "total encapsulation."²³ This binary animates

²³ Stuart Hall, 'Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,' in *Cultural Resistance Reader*, ed. Steven Duncombe (London: New York: Verso, 2002), 187.

most discussions around the relationship of popular culture to the consuming public, defined either as ‘authentic’ expression independent of power relations, or an ideological apparatus channelling dominant classes’ ideological interest. Cultural practices function to undermine social order, or as part of the superstructure, maintain and naturalise social hierarchy. There is an omission of one from the other—i.e., of power from culture in the first instance, and culture to individual will in the other. The idea of authentic culture ignores how culture is structured by relations of power, while false consciousness deprives the ‘masses’ of all autonomy, making of them “cultural dopes.” The latter is closer to the Marxist interpretation of the popular as a “dialectic of cultural struggle”, but the passive proletariat has now been replaced by an agential subject who is constantly in battle with hegemonic culture. In Hall’s reformulation, culture is ideological struggle over the production of meaning: ‘a battlefield’ consistently negotiating between the “popular and the power-bloc.”²⁴ Culture is the stage on which this tussle between hegemony and resistance takes place. He borrows the term dialectic to describe “a continuous and necessarily uneven and unequal struggle, in which the dominant culture constantly strives to disorganise and reorganise popular culture...there are points of resistance, there are also moments of supersession.”²⁵

According to Hall, culture is a “structure in dominance.” But despite his cynicism, he maintains that the process of cultural hegemony is never complete. Rather, it exists in a never-ending, exhausting battle over ideology. His work reconciles culture as ‘authentic’ expression and culture as ‘false consciousness’ by stating that it is both. It seeks to establish its hegemony and encounters resistance in a

²⁴ Stuart Hall, ‘Notes on Deconstructing the Popular’.

²⁵ Stuart Hall, 187.

never-ending struggle. Hall's concept of ideology takes its cue from the theory of semiology proposed by Roland Barthes, wherein culture is a system of signs and also from Louis Althusser's argument that people live in "imaginary relations to the real conditions of existence."²⁶ In his work *Representation*, he elaborates on the ideological ground governing the system of signs in popular culture by continuing the work of Barthes on myths and introducing to the domain of representation Michel Foucault's work on discourse.²⁷ Representation is a system of signs grounded in discourse—in all permeating relations of power which is not only repressive but also productive. The subject is already a product of discourse—a system of knowledge that organises all aspects of social existence.

While the first Althusserian model involves deception, the Foucauldian method involves total dominance. In both models, ideology is necessarily the system of ideas of the dominant classes that is imposed upon the working class to gain their willing consent for unequal social relations.²⁸ In Stuart Hall's work, ideology takes primary place and controls representation; while he does mention the extant critique of the Foucauldian method as overdetermining the role of power in the formation of the subject, he brushes the criticism aside to foreground Foucault's contribution. These models are essentially deterministic and the 'cultural struggle', its contestations, are constituted within hierarchies of power which are all pervasive and discursive. This ignores the criticism that if discourse speaks through you, then hegemony is all that is possible.

²⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Dr Annette Lavers, Revised edition (London: RHUK, 2009); Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London; New York: Verso, 2006), 241.

²⁷ Stuart Hall, 'The Work of Representation', in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: SAGE Publications, 1997).

²⁸ Stuart Hall, 'Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates' 2, no. 2 (n.d.): 91–114.

The concept of culture as dialectic of struggle retrieves human will and capacity for resistance, but it also greatly limits the complex interaction between the hegemonic and the resistant. Further, dialectic refers to the social contradiction in the process of transformation. The dialectic method is “the science of the general laws of motion and development of nature, human society and thought.”²⁹ The study of cultural dialectics should be able to provide us a measure of the domination and the revolutionary potential present in society. Yet, this point-based system of historio-cultural analysis treats culture as a sport, a matter of wins and losses rather than a complex and interactive system that not only influences the masses but is in turn influenced by them. The metaphor of the battlefield presumes a combative and oppositional relationship between cultures/cultural artefacts. Such a metaphor elides over the interactive production of culture, limiting the nature of this interaction to combat or negotiation. Further, cultural practices do not begin or end through an ideological rupture, they continuously transform and reinvent themselves. The difficulty in defining popular culture lies precisely in this fact that the term is far too elusive, too vast for there to be a single meaning or understanding of culture or the tools for its interpretation. This argument reduces culture to a binary, ignoring the complexity and multiplicity of the popular and the multimodal interaction of cultures and publics. As he suggests elsewhere, the notion of the dominant ideology and the subordinated ideology is an inadequate way of representing the complex interplay of different ideological discourses and formations in any modern developed society.³⁰

²⁹ Engels F., *Herrn Eugen Dührings Umwälzung der Wissenschaft (Anti-Dühring)*. Marx Engels Werke XX (Dietz Verlag, 1878) Quoted in Hub Zwart, ‘Dialectical Materialism’, in *Continental Philosophy of Technoscience*, ed. Hub Zwart, Philosophy of Engineering and Technology (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 67–109, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84570-4_3.

³⁰ Stuart Hall, ‘Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates’.

The duality of culture as divided into the dominant and the subordinated ideologies suspends the role of history in transforming cultural practices, and limits the possibility of discovering its new meanings and formations. It reduces people to passive consumers and leaves no room for the act of meaning-making. Culture seen as signifying practice ignores the signification, the meanings that people bring to it, how they imagine, construct, dismantle and reproduce culture. Further, the argument assumes a “necessary correspondence” between social classes and their ideology.³¹ which collapses identity, an incidental fact, with ideology, a system of belief or worldview that exists in a non-linear relationship with one’s identity. The socio-economic relations between classes are not the same as the relations of individuals with their class or with other classes. The study of culture can only begin by acknowledging the impossible elusiveness of its definition and its relationship to society.

The concept of nation relies on a similar fallacy, these conceptual frameworks tend to overdetermine the place of the nation in the making of representation and ignores how other social, political factors play a role in meaning-making. There has been some work on intersectionality, for instance, Jenny Rowena’s work on caste and gender through an analysis of Silk Smitha, therefore, other social factors have not been entirely ignored. But these analyses also return to the idea of representation as a system of signs with a concealed meaning. The first concept, of representation as a system is flawed for presuming a structuring of signs into a singularity—the system. The second notion, that of concealed meaning, is also problematic for it assumes that meanings flow seamlessly between text and spectator, that in its address to the audience, cinema is already subsumed by a class, caste and gender contract. These

³¹ Stuart Hall, 94.

readings can also be flawed for being deterministic—they ignore the heterogeneity of the audience, as well as through sociological characterisation attribute certain features to the off-screen as well as on-screen bodies. While the lack of such analysis can be construed a flaw in this thesis, it is a deliberate move to veer the conversation away from readings in which the audience and emotions are absent, thus ignoring the relationship between the audience and the screen and which tend to make generalised statements of the entire cinematic form and social organisation as singular phenomena.

In the case of Hindi cinema, and particularly the film song, as we discussed, the form of cinema is itself seen as popular culture, or rather mass culture, despite important differences between films.³² The cabaret was a particularly ‘low’ cultural form, part of the ‘low’ masala film period. Unlike the so-called melodious songs, the cabaret stands as a corrupt and obscene form—to be enjoyed in private, not to be sung in public or especially danced to publicly, except perhaps in dark theatre stalls full of men, though strangely, at the same time watched by families in theatres.³³ The cabaret straddles between middle-class entertainment and object of male desire. As we will see in chapter 4, the cabaret has been at the centre of debates on sexuality as well. Readings of cabaret are often limited to the study of sexualisation of the female form. They move between stigmatization and recuperation. These readings are themselves guilty of projecting sexualisation without regard for form. As we will later consider, there is a need to rethink the nature of representation of the female body in Hindi cinema. This includes reconsidering her representation as a product of the nationalist

³² Anna Morcom, *Hindi Film Songs and The Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2015).

³³ In another chapter, we will touch upon the new forms of dance in popular circulation which have made the sinuous and sensuous moves of the ‘item number’—a similarly sexualized dance form—a thing of middle-class leisure activity.

project or her representation as a star symbolic of the nation. It is the readings of national politics in cinema which would be critiqued to instead argue that our study of representation requires a fresh set of tools. Before we enter the discussion on the film song and the scholarship on film and sexuality, it is proposed that the reader be acquainted with the broader debate on cinema as national cinema which will then provide a backdrop for our study of sexuality and cinema. This elaboration is crucial to the understanding of the representations of the woman in Hindi film that also centre the nation as the primary axis through which to understand the representations of sexuality in film, this will be elaborated in detail in the third chapter. Through a critique of these two assumptions, of Hindi cinema as National cinema and the representation of the female body in Hindi film as national imagination, this work suggests that we look at the emotive and the social character of the representation of the cabaret dancer through an exploration of the song form as she moves between desire and desirability, a representation beyond the present arguments on the subject.

Section II: Understanding Hindi Film

A Brief History of Hindi Film

Magic Lantern, the Lumiere Brothers' company, began with the film *Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory* shown in India soon after its release in France in 1896. This event introduced motion pictures to India, propelling the rise of what has now become one of the largest and most prolific film industries in the world. At the nascent stages of filmmaking hand held video cameras for the recording of events, plays and other performances (such as HS Bhatavadekar's record of a wrestling match

in Bombay and dance/circus performances).³⁴ From its beginnings, film has been a spectacular medium, beginning as technological curiosity, it has embedded itself into the lives of people, becoming a significant part of popular culture. Earliest motion pictures were shorts that captured scenes of movement—stunts, wrestling, dance were the first themes to be captured visually.³⁵ Experimentative efforts of a perceptive few and their foresight in recognising the potential of visual technology to document, distribute and screen real or imaginary scenes evolved into an instrument not only for entertainment but to capture socio-political events. It is impossible to imagine how journalism and reportage of world events would be today without it.

Early cinema was divided between the spectacular possibility of technology to capture movement and bring to its audience the performance of the fantastical and affect—whether the early shorts on dancers, acrobats or wrestlers, or the earliest genres of the mythological or stunt films. The Indian Cinematograph Committee (ICC) report gives us a glimpse into early cinema culture. It is reported that while the educated class of Indians and the British enjoyed American films and Indian films driven by narrative and dialogue, a large number of the “illiterate public” enjoyed “mythological, socials, romance, comedies.” Early cinema was a particularly spectacular form that saw a range of characters and situations that would seem

³⁴ Further in the thesis, we will also explore Aijaz Ahmed’s dismissal of any such labelling of an ‘Indian history’ as it speaks to a history of cinema.

³⁵ Harishchandra Sakharam Bhatavadekar’s 1899 recording *The Wrestlers* is the first known motion picture. Apart from this, we have accounts of dance and acrobatic performances being captured on camera. See Rangoonwala (1975) *75 years of Indian Cinema* for a detailed history of cinema. While it is acknowledged that poor archival practices and lack of scholarship means that there is a great number of films and cinema history that is lost to us, some history can be recovered through print media and legislative debates such as the Indian Cinematograph Committee Report of 1927. Chaired by V. Rangachariah, then Madras High Court judge, the report extensively details the state of the Indian film industry from popular theatres to audience tastes. It recommends the centralization of film censorship along with recommendations for bolstering the Indian film industry. The document also offers rich debates on the anxieties of film’s influence on perceptions of the colonial rule. The report was shelved and its recommendations never saw the light of day. Also See Rajadhyaksha and Willeman (2010) for a critical assessment of filmography in India.

completely absurd in real life—characters from mythology, action heroines, and stories that had their antecedents in performance traditions, myths or magical fantasy.³⁶

The first ever full-length ‘film’ was the theatrical performance of *Shree Pundalik*, a Marathi on-stage performance recorded by the camera.³⁷ Dadasaheb Phalke’s *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) was the first full-length feature film shot for the explicit purpose of filmic exploration.³⁸ A mythological, it has been understood by scholars as representing an idealized idea of Indian past that uses the cultural tradition of myth to further the nationalist cause.³⁹ This, however, is at best a surmise and not a robust one at that. The story of the king Harishchandra might have been a choice based on the fact that it is a fairly familiar story with sufficient dramatic tension and also a moral tale.

Phalke later started the Hindustan Film Company driven by the desire to develop indigenous cinema. Some scholars maintain that his aim was to promote Indian national culture through film. They claim that his first film was motivated by a desire to revise the use of modern technology for an assertion of national identity through the use of tradition and myth. But there is not sufficient evidence to suggest so. The claim could very well be a case of retrospective projection. Ashish

³⁶ Virchand Dharamsey, ‘The Advent of Sound in India Cinema: Theatre, Orientalism, Action, Magic’, *Journal of the Moving Image*, 2010, 22–51, https://jmionline.org/article/the_advent_of_sound_in_indian_cinema_theatre_orientalism_action_magic_1.

³⁷ Dadasaheb Tourne, N.G. Chitre, and P.R. Tipnis, *Shree Pundalik*, 1912.

³⁸ Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, *Raja Harishchandra*, Short, History (Phalke Films, 1913).

³⁹ See Ashish Rajadhyaksha for an analysis of Phalke’s filmmaking ambitions. He proposes that the Hindi film began with a ‘Neo-traditional’ urge that carried over to the mythological genre. He refers to the magical property of camera technology to capture and transmit fiction across the nation that inspired Phalke to exploit the medium to inspire nationalist conscious. The resurrection of myth and the magic of the camera unite in the early years of cinema as a means to developing a nationalist ethos.

Rajadhyaksha suggests that Phalke's first film was "neo-traditionalist" in its form, capturing the strange mix of past tradition and contemporary technology to awaken the masses and bolster the local film industry that largely showed British and American films at the time. This is a tenable claim. Rajadhyaksha notes that Phalke, after watching the *Birth of Christ* was motivated by his wonderment if the people of the nation will ever have the chance to see figures from their myth and religion on the silver screen, images with which they could identify. The desire to bring *native* images and fantasies to the screen drove Phalke's project, Hindustani Productions. With the recognition conferred to Phalke as the father of Indian cinema, early film history reads largely as a study of the mythological and devotional, seen to be the dominant genres of Hindi film.⁴⁰ While this is a visible and important trend of nationalist cinema both before and after independence, this is one strand of the fabric of the many films from the period. It is now known that there were predecessors to the film *Raja Harishchandra*.⁴¹ Apart from the mythological, it was the romantic that became the chief genre of dominant popular cinema. This was supplemented by spectacular fantastic genres such as the Arabian nights fantasy film and the stunt-action film.⁴² The reconstruction of Hindi cinema as "neo-traditional" nationalist cinema fails to account for the fantasy and stunt films that were equally, if not more,

⁴⁰ Rosie Thomas, *Bombay Before Bollywood: Film City Fantasies*, First edition (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited - New Delhi, 2014); Ravi S. Vasudevan, "Film Studies, New Cultural History and Experience of Modernity", *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 44 (1995): 2809–14, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4403399>.

⁴¹ See Rosie Thomas, *ibid.* She particularly mentions amongst other names, the name of a photographer Hiralal Sen who is said to have finished up to 12 productions before 1912, a year before most officially recorded film histories define the beginnings of filmmaking in the country.

⁴² In the same work, Thomas notes the prevalence of a B and C grade cinema that has received little scholarly attention with special attention to what she names *Arabian nights fantasy film*. She links its distribution practices and spectatorial pleasures to subalternity whose pleasures exceeded the nation-building project of the social (that emerged as the dominant narrative code post-independence) and the religious, nativist functions of the devotional. See also Vasudevan *ibid.* for a brief exploration of the pre-independence genre classification.

popular. These films cannot be conflated with the idea of the nation by any stretch. Rather, what comes through is the desire to bring people closer to the ability of cinema to bring fantasy to life, inspiring awe and evoking affective pleasure.

Many of the films from the period are no longer available and information related to the films has only come to us through synopses. As Rajadhyaksha and Willeman suggest, we do not enter a film “empty headed” but with an “amalgam of discourses about a film” that constitute the “intertextual network” of the film.⁴³ This is useful to remember even in the case of academic scholarship, since we often enter the domain of film studies through such discursive entry points.

There are other plausible explanations for the popularity of the mythological. For one, even prior to cinema, it was one of the most important genres of visual arts since many of the stories drew on myths to attract crowds. The myths were simple and intelligible to a large part of the audience since they were often stories that were already known. Further, myths allowed the exploitation of the most attractive aspect of motion pictures, the ability to use magical effects and create a sense of awe and wonder in the audience. Myths, being larger than life, provided a respite from everyday toils and a means of enjoyment of otherwise unimaginable lives. To understand the attraction of mythology as magic, one only needs to look at the other popular film genres of the time such as fantasy and stunt, which similarly relied on effects to pull in audiences. A thorough assessment of the times is all the more difficult due to the lack of available resources such as audience profiles, places where such films were released and for which audiences and towns. It remains a moot question as to what sort of nationalist appeal the films carried if any, whether society

⁴³ Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willeman, eds., *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*, 2nd edition (Chicago, Ill.: Routledge, 1999), 11.

at large perceived cinema from this perspective, whether cinema was in fact seen as an important driver of dissent. We cannot assert with certainty what the appeal of films was for the audiences of the time—whether there were other pedagogical or entertainment factors that contributed to the attraction of the mythological. Most importantly, while the fact remains that Phalke’s film was the very first feature film and consequently was a trendsetter, we do not have enough information as to whether it was any more successful than other genres in the following few years.⁴⁴ The significance attributed to the logic of the ‘first’ and the subsequent underplaying of the other prominent cinema of the time has fed into the widespread assumptions of cinema as necessarily invested in the politics of the nation ignoring its many diverse cultural and political affiliations and its import in excess of the political conditions of any particular moment.

Cinema embedded itself in popular culture as it grew in its reach and audience. It drew large crowds with its affordable pricing and became an integral part of public entertainment. By the 1930s, several cinema halls had come up. The first chain of cinema halls was started by Jamshedji Framji Madan who distributed films across India beginning in 1902. By 1927, Indian film industry had become significant enough to draw the attention of the British government that sought to bring back the popularity of British films and formed the Indian Cinematograph Enquiry Committee to that end. The committee recommended greater investment in the development of an indigenous cinema, a suggestion that was quietly discarded. By the 1920s, cinema had also gained nationalist fervour, used to capture documentary footage of political and grand historical events and support for social reform under the anti-colonial

⁴⁴ The 1927 Indian Cinematograph Committee report provides insights to this time period and proves a valuable archive which questions the attention given to mythologicals at the expense of other co-existing genres.

movement. Films such as 'Delhi Durbar and Coronation' captured the political events of the time, and particularly the nationalist movement. However, it must be noted that these films were largely documentaries. It is not at all obvious that we can say the same about feature films of the time.

By the 1930s, the 'social' had gained some popularity side-by-side with other genres such as the Wadia brothers' stunt films starring Mary Ann Evans, known as 'Fearless Nadia'. Wadia brothers' films were hugely popular for their action sequences that exploited the fantastical potential of cinema. The action stunt drama is greatly underrated by scholars on Hindi film who tend to focus on nationalist cinema or, more egregiously, read nationalism into films. Several films of the time can be classified as stunt or action cinema, but there existed also romantic tragedies such as *Devdas* (1935) and *Manmohan* (1936).⁴⁵ The social on the other hand, often focused on issues of social reform, films such as *Acchutt Kanya* (1936) addressed the question of caste and child marriage and films like *Jeevan Naiya* (1936) showed the plight of dancing girls.⁴⁶ Viridi proposes that these films co-opted women's issues as national issues, using these themes to stage the dilemma of pre-colonial pasts and post-colonial futures in relation to the status of women and their social oppression. This claim is, once again, open to question. We will discuss claims of this nature below. The influence of Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) is discernible in the 1940s with films' inclining towards social realism. However, as pointed out above, the inclination towards social realism is not necessarily collapsible to national cinema. The tendency to posit a necessary link between Hindi cinema and the nation often reduces the diversity and multiplicity of social, mythological and action-fantasy films

⁴⁵ P. C. Barua, *Devdas*, Drama (New Theatres Limited, 1935); Mehboob Khan, *Manmohan*, 1936.

⁴⁶ Franz Osten, *Acchut Kannya*, 1936 ; Franz Osten, *Jeevan Naiya*, 1936.

into the rubric of a preoccupation with the nation-state. It is important to recognise that many of these stories were already performed by Parsi Theatre groups and were not in that strict sense, integral to film alone. Parsi theatre had also engaged technology for an involved and awe-inspiring viewing experience with revolving stages, proscenium, multiple sets and affects.⁴⁷ This issue raises larger questions as to the status of film as popular culture, and the relationship of film to the politico-social ethos. This is not to say that film is necessarily a product of individual creativity bracketed from society, but rather that a full-fledged history of film as popular culture needs to engage with diverse and complex intertwining histories of theatre performance, circulation of stories in popular culture and film.

Social realism was popularised by Bengali cinema and also influenced Hindi (Hindustani) cinema as the independence movement gained traction and more films addressed this political situation—either as a retort to the British rule or for a self-reflexive engagement with questions of social reforms—issues of communal harmony, the plight of women and poverty had already become popular themes by the 1940s. Films such as *Dharti ke Lal* (1946) showed the Bengal famine of 1943, and *Neecha Nagar* (1946) highlighted economic disparity between the rich and the poor.⁴⁸ By 1940s, the Indian film industry gained international renown abroad, particularly in the Soviet Union where the themes of social realism and reform were quite popular. IPTA was extremely influential and many of the themes of Indian film addressed the concerns raised by this Left-oriented theatre association. One could think of these films as deliberate awareness-raising cinema that set out to highlight important social concerns. But these themes should not be mistaken for the reason of the appeal of the

⁴⁷ Kathryn Hansen, *The Parsi Theatre*, Edition (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2005).

⁴⁸ Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, *Dharti Ke Lal*, 1946; Chetan Anand, *Neecha Nagar*, Drama (India Pictures, 1946).

film; the pleasures of viewing include finding comfort in the emotional appeal of the film—in the battles between good/evil, questions of duty, sacrifice which are essential elements of tragedy. Films give us something to laugh about, to cry about, to feel with the characters on-screen, giving an outlet for empathy and catharsis. In this sense, the appeal of film i.e., the ‘popular’ in the definition of film as popular culture is always in excess of socio-political realities of people’s lives. Their interaction with these socio-political processes occurring at the level of the nation-state, only has a marginal effect on the lives of people. In this sense the historical moment of Indian independence which is often seen as a watershed moment that transformed the nature of film, or that provided the blueprint for a Hindi cinema determined by the Indian nation-state is an incomplete and misleading assertion. Nevertheless, nationalism became an important theme to draw and enlighten audiences, and played a role in the commercial success and popularity of certain films. Films with themes of land, agriculture and the plight of farmers were especially popular. The conflict between tradition and modernity was also an important theme, in these films as in many others. These films need to be understood as both commercial projects as well as social commentaries. These films are also said to represent the Nehruvian socialist-development model.⁴⁹ *Mother India* (1957) is a prime example of this tendency.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ The Nehruvian socialist-development model can be characterised by its emphasis on scientific progress as the future of the nation, while keeping in mind the large section of its impoverished public. It is believed to symbolise development for all through scientific achievement, while retaining the character of diverting its wealth for the betterment of its people.

⁵⁰ Mehboob Khan’s *Mother India* (1957) became the most successful film of its time. It tells the story of a woman who after the death of her husband takes it upon herself to provide for her family. The many trials and tribulations of her character provide the trajectory of the narrative. Ravi Vasudevan reads the film as an example of the emergence of the Nehruvian model. He analyses a particular scene that shows the inauguration of the dam watering her fields as a pivotal moment where scientific achievement asserts its triumph over the regressive social elements. The film is also critical of feudal relationships of which the money lender becomes a synecdoche while the character of the mother, a poor, struggling farmer represents the large section of India’s public. The film is also popular for its final scene in which the mother kills her son when he tries to abduct the daughter of the money lender who had harassed them in all sorts of ways. It is her ultimate sacrifice.

Early Film Scholarship

Cinema and Psyche

Early scholarship on film sought to historicize film and understand its “psychic geography” as it spoke to the dreams and anxieties of the citizens.⁵¹ According to this understanding, film is an interplay of the social and the psychic, that is to say, film appeals to us on a psychological level even as it engages with issues of social relevance. It draws us into its world as a dream, a fantasy. Its visual appeal largely relies on the possibility of cinema to imaginatively realise what would be impossible in one’s every day, material lives. Cinema in this sense is distinguished from reality. This does not, however, mean that the pleasures of cinema are completely divorced from reality. Rather, it asserts that cinema through its psychic possibilities offers a window to the real. Cinema’s peculiar ability to give expression to our dreams and desires is also an active construction—it does not simply mirror or reflect our fantasies back to us but actively constructs them. All of these approaches consist of an attempt to treat film as such as a discursive object, as textual practice.

Cinema and Ideology

Later film scholarship beginning in the 90s onwards became focused on the political and ideological aspects of cinema. The relationship between cinema and ideology needs to be unpacked by first understanding the meaning of both terms and finding points of convergence and divergence between the two. By ideology we mean one of three things— A particular political idea about society, state and governance, with its own agenda or program. Secondly, it also refers to someone’s set of beliefs, a system of ideas or even a worldview. And finally, we could also be referring quite simply to

⁵¹ Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*.

an opinion. However, in its strict usage, ideology is necessarily political. It is not a neutral term.⁵² In using this term, we refer generally to the governing ideas of a particular group, section or class, for example, we refer to the ideology of the ruling class. The second question that arises is: what is the relationship of the ruling class to cinema; does it exist in combination of all of these domains and if so, does it exist as a monolith? Or can it be asserted that it is specific to a certain definition of cinema exclusive of others? Another question is as to how ideology uses cinema as its tool. Of course, the two questions are interlinked, since to provide proof of its existence is also to explain its function, its modality. In this section, we shall refer to a specific scholarly work, *Ideology of the Hindi Film* that has been widely influential, to understand this link.

The central proposition here is that Hindi cinema is ideological in the sense that it engages with and defines the politics of the nation and its citizen-spectators. Madhav Prasad defines “cinema as an institution that is part of the continuing struggle within India over the form of the state”⁵³ His definition partly relies on the argument that the country is in a constant state of “passive revolution” of which cinema is a part.⁵⁴ In this sense, the ideology of film is a complex affair wherein the dominant group’s ownership of the production process does not fully determine the kind of films produced since in order to be successful a film has to take into account the

⁵² Of course, in providing this definition we are also simplifying and eliding over the debate on its meanings and uses. But that is a far more extensive project than is possible here and the definition provided above should suffice for our discussion. For a lucid explanation and set of definitions of the term, See John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*.

⁵³ Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film*, 9.

⁵⁴ Passive revolution is a reference to Gramsci and the adoption of his concept in subaltern studies that argued for an alternative reading of the relationship between dominant ideology and its subjects. Antonio Gramsci, *An Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, ed. David Forgacs (New York: Schocken, 1988).

disparate desires of its audience. Though the production system is subsumed by capitalist relations, this is not the case with the film itself. Ideology is not a linear, but a cyclical process; cinema represents us to ourselves wherein representation is the act of presenting anew, imbuing the object of representation with new, unfamiliar meanings.⁵⁵ This view tends to underplay the contradictory and competing meanings that pervade cinema; cinema establishes hegemony by constructing ways of seeing, yet it is also a place of dissent. Further, as has been argued elsewhere, film is a site where it is the 'other'—the middle-classes and the proletariat who shape cinema and are in turn shaped by it.

According to Prasad, Hindi film is governed by a heterogeneity in its mode of manufacture, wherein various artistic traditions are brought together without being assimilated and subsumed by the requirements of the narrative. To quote:

Hindi film industry has adopted what Marx calls the 'heterogeneous form of manufacture' in which the whole is assembled from parts produced separately by specialists, rather than being centralized around the processing of a given material, as in serial or organic manufacture. This is of significance to the status of the 'story' in the Hindi film. ...the kind of narrative contexts that the given dialogue, lyrics, dances and stock characters make possible *do not require* [emphasis in the original] a prepared script, simply because the variations in them are caused by innovation internal to the traditions . . . rather than the external pressure of the particularities of a narrative.⁵⁶

This could be understood to the fact of a multitude of artistic forms coming together for the purpose of making a film. Though one could say that there is a film industry which could ostensibly be understood as an institution. But, cinema, in the comprehensive sense of the term, with its wider meaning that includes the variety of

⁵⁵ See Hall, 'The Work of Representation'.

⁵⁶ Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film*, 32–45.

practices from the content and form of the films, the culture of its audiences etc, will always be in excess of the industry. Further, there is no clear moment in which the industry was founded. It grew out of a variety of efforts from individual practitioners and can be said to have been concretised through the artists and the public. At all events, it was definitely not founded by the state. Cinema is not an institution since institutions imply some commonality or collectivity between its various members, organized for specific purposes.⁵⁷ This is important for us to understand since if cinema is not an institution i.e., it is not a monolithic or at any rate cohesive body, any argument that takes this claim as its first premise could be blind to its diversity. Of course, the concept of ‘passive revolution’ offers a way out of this bind. Through the suggestion that it is only the process of production that is integrated into capital relations and not its content, Prasad argues that the hegemony of the industry covers how films are produced and does not extend into *what* it produces. In other words, hegemony governs the process but not the product. Nevertheless, this argument assigns a political value to every film that is made. This is, however, problematic since such a claim can only be substantiated in certain cases, and would not hold true for a number of films without stretching the notion to the point of vacuity.

The definition of cinema as the “formal subsumption of the state” follows from the earlier argument on the relation between film and the nation-state. Drawing on a reading of Marx who defines the real and formal subsumption of the modes of production into capitalist ideology, formal subsumption describes a state in the

⁵⁷ The Oxford Dictionary of English defines it as ‘an organisation founded for a religious, educational, professional or social purposes.’ The question arises, to what extent could we think of cinema as an ‘organisation’ and if it were so, what is its purpose? Though one could say that as an industry, it implies a degree of contractual organisation, such a definition constructs a parochial view of the wide-ranging term ‘cinema’

economic relations wherein “capitalism takes control of the production process without transforming it.”⁵⁸ If by this Prasad means that the film industry is defined by a capitalist mode of production which extends to most if not all industrial processes there is not much to argue. But more problematically he further suggests that following from this capitalistic mode of manufacture, we can also define cinema as an “Ideological State Apparatus.”⁵⁹

According to him, the repetitive formula of cinema reiterates the dominant nexus between the power-bloc as “feudal family romance” concealing the feudal, capitalist and patriarchal ideology that underlies the ideology of the state. This format is linked to the ideology of the state, the formation of which depends on a coalition of the feudal, patriarchal capitalist systems.

Prasad argues that this class (the new rulers) produced, in certain popular forms of postcolonial discourse, an image of the people as a self-absorbed, innocent and essentially conservative (tradition was of course the preferred term) population that needed (even if it did not demand it) to be protected from extreme sensory stimulation and expressions of desire. Economic backwardness was supplemented by

⁵⁸ Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film*, 13.

⁵⁹ This is a reference to Althusser’s concept of Ideological State Apparatus. The ideological apparatus according to Althusser are the institutions that pervade our everyday lives and interpellates us into the ideology of capitalism, making willing subjects out of us. Families, schools are some of the examples he presents as those who ensure our false consciousness. These systems naturalise our relationship to state ideology and our own ideological subjectivity. This raises another question on whether there is such a thing as subjectivity in the singular. One could argue that subjectivity itself is always plural. We are not subjects of one or the other but inhabit the world in a complex intersection of various identities. Our place in the world or even our relation to the state is not simply as citizens but an amalgamation of subjectivities. See ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses by Louis Althusser 1969-70’, accessed 6 November 2021, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>.

a cultural backwardness that required strict control especially over modern cultural productions.⁶⁰

In this sense, we can see that his work is an attempt to reconcile the history of the state with that of the evolving modes of narration and form. Commercial cinema relies on narrative repetition for its success; it provides the spectator the fulfilment of its expectations. Narrative conventions in the Hindi film often exploit the familiar and known, with the narrative often being given as part of a cinematic tradition, and it is from within these given tropes that new social concerns and redressal of anxieties happen in Hindi cinema.⁶¹

‘Feudal family romance’ refers to a particular spectrum of narrative form: The hero is the good son to a patriarch, who marries a woman who is scornful of family values. The woman eventually realises that her place is the home (of her husband and in-laws), and her fulfilment consists in upholding and protecting the familial values. Sometimes, for the sake of dramatic tension, a second son is introduced, who is himself a bad apple, or marries a woman who is ‘modern’ and contemptuous of family values, in contrast to the elder son and daughter-in-law who are model members of a joint or extended family. This also re-establishes the patriarchal authority of the hero around whose efforts to preserve or restore the ideals of the

⁶⁰ Elsewhere, he has argued that such a view is an infantilisation of the viewer, a remnant of our colonial past which saw the colonised as an uncivilised subject unable to distinguish between the real and the represented, driven by passion over reason. Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film*, 12. For his essay on colonial censorship see M. Madhava Prasad, ‘The Natives Are Looking: Cinema and Censorship in Colonial India’, in *Law’s Moving Image*, ed. Leslie Moran et al. (NY: Routledge, 2004).

⁶¹ This is an oft repeated understanding of the Hindi film (though of course, this could be said of any genre of film across the world). Whether as interruption, melodrama or the ‘new in the fold of the old’, each of these rely on the idea of a conventional narrative of film; certain themes recur and narrative progression, sometimes even the storyline remains common across films—from a crisis of duty, to denouement and resolution.

family the film revolves.⁶² Prasad suggests that the film is a seminal site for our entrenchment into and acceptance of the established social order which is intrinsically feudal and patriarchal. This view is deeply problematic for many reasons. For one, such an engagement counters what Chakravarty has called the “subaltern” in the “body-politic.”⁶³ If cinema serves as a site for ideological conflict, the theory of the naïve spectator leaves no room for the contradictory engagements of film with the multiple publics comprising different classes, genders, castes and so on. If cinema serves an ideological function that is complicit in our interpellation, and our engagement with, and our delight in, the narratives of cinema stem from our hypnosis, question arises as to how the appeal of film could exceed this ideological monolith. The cardinal assumption here that the spectator is an unthinking, uncritical subject whose false consciousness is constructed by hegemonic images goes counter to her supposed ability to critically engage with it.⁶⁴

⁶² This is open to charge that it is highly selective; one might ask whether it is even possible to produce a general commentary of the film form without undermining its diversity. There have been a number of commercial films revolving around strong women, or around the troubles faced by women (for instance, to name a few randomly from across decades, *Mother India* (by Mahaboob Khan, 1957), *Charithra* (B.R. Ishara, 1973) and *Damini* (Rajkumar Santoshi, 1993) or *Chaalbaaz* (Pankaj Parashar, 1989). The question arises whether these films are patriarchal in the sense that the woman’s overcoming of subjugation, and sometimes punishment for transgression ultimately leads to a resolution in which patriarchy prevails. Another point worth making is that the reassertion of male authority in the denouement to which academic scholarship refers is itself an erasure of the female’s role and contribution to the film. It underplays her struggles even as it seeks to point out the domination of the male. It remains our task to excavate these possibilities.

⁶³ Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987*.

⁶⁴ The chapter titled the ‘aesthetics of mobilisation’ which refers to the rise of Amitabh Bachchan’s stardom that grew out of his roles as a member of the working class in conflict with the state and capitalism points us to the possibility of film as an act of dissent. But it needs to be pointed out that this isolation of a particular moment in time is a selective reading of cinema’s possibilities, and there is no cohesion possible in reading the history of film. To reiterate an assertion from an earlier section, films have been diverse from the beginning and continue to be so.

The Writing of History: Hindi Film and the Nation-state

The debate on cinema and nation begins with two assumptions about Hindi Cinema. Firstly, that in a largely illiterate country, film replaced print capitalism in the formation of the “imagined community.”⁶⁵ This definition is adapted from Benedict Anderson’s work on print capitalism in Europe in which the print media, by appealing to a wide national audience, constructed certain codes of nationhood that seemingly unified its disparate public into a singular subject, constructing national consciousness by calling upon them to identify the nation as a community imagined through its language, its cultural and socio-political engagement with the life of the nation. Secondly, the Hindi film by virtue of addressing themes that resonate across the country and touch upon issues of national relevance aspires to an “all-India audience.”⁶⁶ Films, it has been claimed, contend with and shape national identity. Viridi’s project on cinema and the nation framed as “Cinematic Imagi-Nation” proposes that films speak to the dreams and anxieties of its audience. Such scholarship treats cultural artefacts as political representations. As she states ‘national’ as related to Hindi cinema bears all its varied meanings: as pertaining to the nation, as imbued with emotional fervour for the nation shared by varied constituencies, and as a “pan-Indian phenomenon.” In this section, we elaborate on and critique the limitations of such an approach that studies film aesthetics through the narrow, distorting lens of national ideology.

Contemplating the term ‘third-world’ art, Seamus Deane writes:

Is it possible to write a history of any form of ‘Art’, is it possible to locate it territorially, and at the same time to be free of any conception of art that is not at least implicitly essentialist and therefore subversive of the very idea and form of history - that is not in some sense either reactionary or ancestral in its

⁶⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd edition (London: Verso, 1991).

⁶⁶ Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public*.

longings, and, ultimately, impassive toward all forms of exposition or explanation?⁶⁷

His statement resonates with the criticism of the label of national cinema given below. It asks whether any historical analysis and particularly territorial analysis, of the history of a nation and its culture for instance, is bound to lapse into essentialism, marking cultural products as products of the nation.

Nation and Cinema

Scholars have suggested that there were strong linkages between the nation and cinema, with cinema functioning as an imagined, fantastical space where dilemmas of the nation are resolved.⁶⁸ Jyotika Virdi defines the Hindi Film as “sites which intersect political life and spill into its social text.”⁶⁹ Her statement echoes throughout the book narrating the relationship of cinema and society in terms of the history and political processes of the nation-state. Virdi provides a description of Hindi cinema as one that consistently engages the imagination of the viewers through their engagement with the “conflicts experienced by the imagined community.” It both constructs and provides relief for the citizen’s identification and engagement with the nation-state through a continual process of contestation and affirmation. Like Vasudevan, she also asserts that it is the trope of family through which the nation comes to the fore in Hindi film. Her argument on the anxieties of the audience about national processes and the contradictory hegemony of the nation that continually asserts itself through cinema rests on the premise that visual media in the 21st century

⁶⁷ Seamus Deane, "Critical Reflections", *Artforum*, December 1993, <https://www.artforum.com/print/199310/seamus-deane-with-an-introduction-by-luke-gibbons-33684>, quoted in Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, eds., *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*, 2nd edition (Chicago, Ill.: Routledge, 1999).

⁶⁸ These will be discussed individually and therefore, an extensive list of scholarship on the subject is not provided here.

⁶⁹ Jyotika Virdi, *The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 23

plays a similar role as the print media in 19th century as identified by Anderson.⁷⁰ However, the very idea of contradiction constitutes a dent in her own argument. If films reaffirm the nation, then they are no more than hegemonic artefacts that make puppets of the audience, duping them into participation against their own interests. On the other hand, if films are contestations against the logic of the state, its hegemonic function is no longer significant in the film.

It may be argued that in both instances, the spectre of the nation haunts cultural production of film and cinema lies at the crux of national identity. Yet, this argument, which echoes Jameson's assertion that all third-world culture is national allegory, takes a myopic, if not euro-centric and colonising view of the cultures of the colonised nations. Aijaz Ahmed provides a biting critique of this argument in his essay on Jameson's theory. As he argues,

...there is no such thing as a "third-world literature" which can be studied as an internally coherent object of theoretical knowledge. There are fundamental issues—of periodisation, social and linguistic formations, political and ideological struggles *within* the field of literary production (italics mine) ...which simply cannot be resolved at this level of generality without an altogether positivist reductionism.⁷¹

Theoretical models that have evolved as a study of the politics of the nation vis-à-vis the film industry tend to focus on the larger patterns at the risk of ignoring individual film narratives that have either challenged, contended with national ideology, or have served an altogether different purpose that cannot except by a form of gymnastic leap be categorized within the same field as texts that have an explicit

⁷⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

⁷¹ Aijaz Ahmad, 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the "National Allegory"', *Social Text*, no. Autumn 1987 (1987): 4.

retelling of the story of the nation. Even in this sense, one needs to keep in mind that the quest for stories where the political backdrop of the nation is simply a setting stage for a story of intense emotional and affective pleasure not reducible to national politics except in few cases. This is not to treat cinema as an apolitical category that is uninfluenced by the socio-economic processes or the cultural, political features that permeate everyday life. Rather, it is the recognition that the political form of our everyday lives is constantly in excess of the state and is not determined by it. That in turn is in excess of our cultural life. It is ‘within’ the production of texts that one can trace some of the antagonisms, and the sites for other kinds of engagement, not in a positivistic study of political ideology of cinema and particularly, the incumbent burden of ‘third-world’ cinema as such. Ahmed’s work also highlights the “meta-text of the Third Worlds theory” that underlies this argument. Such a stance tends to underplay the different ideological grounds and the various histories of the colonized nations, and defines them primarily through the lens of this “historical rupture” which then makes nationalism “an exclusive, desirable” ideological lens from which to study these texts⁷². Further, this theoretical maneuver limits our understanding of aesthetics and the multilectal engagement with the everyday as our readings of the text are bound by “descriptive construction.”⁷³ For Ahmed, it means that the various “intersecting conflicts” based on class, gender, religion etc. are often pushed aside in favor of the narratives derived from the national allegory critique. These approaches also fail to address the relations of production and of other social hierarchies, looking instead at the ‘third-world’ as forever imprisoned in their imperialist past. Ranajit Guha in the subaltern studies series has also pointed towards such readings of history

⁷² Ahmad, 6.

⁷³ Ahmad, *ibid.*

where the variety of struggles against various oppressive forces, and local conflicts have been conflated and appropriated by the theme of national struggle. The concept of subaltern studies is precisely to draw out histories that are not necessarily histories of colonial pasts.⁷⁴ The concept of a national cinema, however critically engaged with the politics of popular culture and the nation, is bound to be susceptible to such reductive slippages. Both models—that of imagined community and national allegory which underpin these positions have come under heavy criticism through further research and scholarly critique that call into question this too neat unitary conceptualisation of popular culture and the nation.

Virdi defines film as national fantasy, i.e., the coming together of the multiple viewing publics to deconstruct their anxieties over the larger frame of the nation through cinematic fantasy—its closures, character depictions, mise-en-scene, a metaphor of national politics. The dilemmas of the nation-state are contested and resolved in the cinematic narrative.

Popular films touch a major nerve in the nation's body politic, address common anxieties and social tensions, and articulate vexed problems that are ultimately resolved by presenting mythical solutions to restore an (*sic*) utopian world. The situation, complication, action, and resolution in all popular film narratives both creates and is created by a collective social imagination⁷⁵

They also suggest that rather than an explicit relationship between film and national ideology, cinema has distanced itself from the “identification with...a coercive state apparatus.”⁷⁶ Echoing Prasad's claim, these scholars also tend to view

⁷⁴ Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: OUP USA, 1989).

⁷⁵ Jyotika Virdi, *The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History*, 9.

⁷⁶ Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987*, 19.

cinema as a form of Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). Yet, an observation of language in the Hindi film points to its alternative function as an instrument of reading the everyday as it exists beyond the scope of the nation-state. Its use of Hindi and Urdu, and the familiar colloquial language that stands in contrast with the language of the state testifies to its character as public or popular culture not amenable to a statist reading. If Hindi cinema is national cinema, how are we to understand the cultural exchange and adaptation of cinema from other parts of the world, particularly Hollywood? Sumita Chakravarty states that films “are adapted to a local sensibility, are topical, and most important, are connected with an indigenous star system and genre expectations from the Indian audience that will always exclude Hollywood.”⁷⁷

This insistent comparison of Hindi film as distinct from Hollywood is already complacent in the construction of a body of knowledge as vehemently other-ised. Film scholars, feeling the need to construct a unique understanding of the Hindi film, and to carve out a place of some distinction, have often taken recourse to cultural difference as immutable fact. The film industry in India is both similar to and different from Hollywood. The star system, perhaps not as visible in its idolatry, is also part of Hollywood and this system by no means localises or even defines the industry. The assumption that for a variety of reasons, the Hindi film is distinct from the west and requires its own unique tools of understanding ignores the transactional nature of aesthetic practices. While, whether in language or in themes, the Hindi film does mark some distinction from the films in Hollywood, these distinctions cannot be measured in terms of audience enjoyment which is a far more important category since it links the effect of art on the viewer rather than the transmission of embedded

⁷⁷ Sumita S. Chakravarty, 21.

practices of codes or signs, nor can one suggest that the aesthetic practices of the two cinemas vary greatly enough to be contrasted with one another. The similarity of the technological medium, of training schools and the continual influences of cinemas over each other preclude any such distinctness. The logic of adaptation and translatability of a text from one culture to another is different in film from literature as films share a code of visual language that is nearly universal. Even as there maybe thematic, or stylistic differences between two visual texts, these are not unique enough to assert cultural differences and these differences themselves are not amenable to rigid alterity of one industry to another.

Chakravarty, in her introduction, suggests that Hindi cinema involves a process of “imperso-nation”, whereby the diegetic space is reproduced as a political ground for the masquerades of the politics of a nation. She suggests that “impersonation subsumes a process of externalization, the play of/on surfaced, the disavowal of fixed notions of identity.” While commercial cinema is often seen as a “debased and parasitic form”, her introduction defines the project as retrieval of the political in popular culture, while also blurring and critiquing the distinction between high, mass and popular. Her work asserts that the theme of “changeability and metamorphosis, tension and contradiction, recognition and alienation, surface and depth” constitute the cinematic narrative.⁷⁸ This assertion echoes the critique mounted by the theories on Hindi film and melodrama. Using this as a starting point, she suggests that the Hindi film “used the masquerade to transgress boundaries with impunity and to inscribe the national itself as the ideal-typical mode of impersonation.”⁷⁹ She suggests that films in their implicit, subconscious level are

⁷⁸ Sumita S. Chakravarty, 4.

⁷⁹ Sumita S. Chakravarty, 5–6.

constantly battling the state, wherein the national inserts itself in the film through a duplicitous masquerade. She further links this act to the *bahuru:pi* tradition, roughly translated to many forms/faces, which is an art form characterised by playing of several roles or wearing different guises by the same artist. In the *bahuru:pi* form, the artist plays multiple roles as a polymorphic presence rather than a singular, consistent character. This form, which is claimed to be central to Indian art forms and characteristic of the Hindi film, makes little sense particularly in the context of Hindi cinema. She suggests that it is the nation itself that is a masquerade within these filmic narratives. The concept of deriving the form of Hindi film by tracing it to a particular art tradition is suspicious since it tends to view the art as ahistorical and uninfluenced by the transactions with various other forms of art. While *bahuru:pi* remains an important, though not definitive art tradition, it makes little sense to say that it has governed films to the extent of being the defining originary cultural practice of Hindi cinema up to the 80s.

Like many other scholars on Hindi cinema and the nation, Chakravarty also asserts that the relationship between the post-colonial nation-state and the Hindi film can be summarised “as a mediated form of national consciousness.”⁸⁰ The films that emerged in the period immediately following the formation of an independent Indian nation in 1947 is often likened to processes of nation-making that are always in the process of generating a collective identity. As mentioned above, in his *Imagined Communities*, Anderson discusses the emergence of print capitalism as integral to the making of a sense of community that is built into the process of cultural production. This argument has been negated in post-colonial economies where print literacy and

⁸⁰ Mishra, Vijay, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Joshi, *Bollywood's India*; Jyotika Virdi, *The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History*; Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987*, 8.

circulation are limited, but that has instead resulted in a profusion of sound-image relation to the community. Anderson, refining his thesis, claims that it is films, with the advent with digital technology that participate in the making of a national imaginary. Film “helped give shape to a thousand inchoate dreams.”⁸¹ This insistence on the political dimension of film aesthetics is often deployed through melodrama to address the post-colonial spectator’s understanding of the film as national allegory, which is a corollary of Frederic Jameson’s argument mentioned above that “all third world texts are necessarily national allegory.”⁸² It narrativizes social tensions in forms of affiliations to the ideals of nationhood and an emergent, autonomous articulation of modernity. The claim is that the films from the post- colonial period, embodying as they did the dream of a unified nation and its emerging culture, reformulated concerns of tradition/modernity; that they embodied the incumbent anxieties of the new nation generated by post-colonial panics of self/other; and further that the emergence of a secular/unified mode of address sought to present the socialist ethos of the Nehruvian state.

Film, according to Ravi Vasudevan functions through “structures of familiarity and identification” using established cinematic codes of framing and editing to continually refurbish the anxieties of nationhood.⁸³ He suggests that the social is reiterated through the plot of identification and renunciation for the hero. Taking his cue from Peter Brooks’ argument on melodrama as an oedipal fantasy requiring the symbolic familial triad of father, mother and son, he goes on to explore how narrative tension is constructed and resolved in the exegesis of the text. This

⁸¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 140.

⁸² Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism", *Social Text*, no. 15 (1986): 65, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466493>.

⁸³ Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987*.

echoes another argument on Hindi cinema's consistent use of familiar narratives. Madhava Prasad suggests that cinema rearticulates the novelty of contemporary politics through its familiar narrative strategies, it ensconces new articulations within an older, easily understood structure. The reason for this familiarity is that audiences will either not understand nor accept a film that violates their relatability particularly audiences for whom film viewing is an act of pleasure rather than intellectual exercise. The reiteration and continual reprocessing of certain myths is prevalent in some form or another across cinema cultures, except for the select art film directors who treat the medium not as a means of remuneration but as an aesthetic act. We carry these expectations in relation to every form of mass production since standardisation is both inevitable, and even desirable in such cases to generate audience appeal by meeting their expectations.

Chakravarty states that her project looks at "cinematic text, historical context and national intertext."⁸⁴ In this sense, her thesis combines the form of the film with an external history of the nation with film functioning as an interface between the public and the state. Further she takes up Phillip Rosen's argument that "intertextual coherence is connected to a socio-political and/or socio-cultural coherence implicitly or explicitly assigned to the nation." What does the term intertextual coherence really mean in this context, unless the author is trying to suggest that there are thematic commonalities that respond to audience expectations in some form, even then one can see two texts which, though similar, cannot be alike if they are to sustain audience interest. Any similarity can be studied simply through a more nuanced marking of what constitutes a film narrative and a film genre. What is required then is a more

⁸⁴ Sumita S. Chakravarty. *ibid.*

thorough understanding of the ways in which films are similar or different. Further, an understanding of these similarities cannot risk the mistakes of categorisation that is always a slippery activity.

There is a tendency to link the formal and the socio-political into a monolithic reading in which the external history of the state seems to be mapped through the internal history of the films as they are produced across time periods. This approach has been endemic to the discourse, particularly in India. Instead of treating nationalistic analysis as the basis for textual reading, we need a more careful engagement with the relationship between the socio-political and the aesthetic—these questions have largely remained unresolved. Film studies in India, barring some exceptions, often takes the nation as the central axis around which any discussion on films revolves. This leaves little room for an exploration of other questions of aesthetics and audience reception. Rangoonwala, a film historian, also indicates the difficulties involved in this approach that are eventually detrimental to a rigorous understanding of the history and form of Hindi cinema. He criticizes the scholars' dependence on the nation in the readings of cinema as reductive and incomplete narratives of the Hindi film industry.⁸⁵ We also find in these readings something beyond the “descriptive construction”—these texts do not only construct but also give a normative dimension as to what films are amenable to analysis and thereby worthy of being tagged as national cinema and what texts seem to deviate from this idea and are unworthy of being considered national-popular cinema or part of the canon of cinema studies.

⁸⁵ Feroze Rangoonwala, *75 Years of Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Indian Book Company 1975).

Another frequently used argument for the study of film that links form and history is the idea of nation as “public fantasy”. Specifically, a fantasy representing the nation. In her introduction, Priya Joshi suggests that “Nehru was asking for an act of public fantasy” in his desire to build the nation, she explicates the difference between the two terms-- the state as the judicio-political body and the nation as the space of imagined construction. The function of “popular cinema is the contact zone between the two entities” (the state and nation).⁸⁶ But as she herself comments, “geographical coherence” is an external classification that doesn’t fit the internal logic of theory. Further drawing on Jameson, it is asserted that culture is “political unconscious.” Political unconscious directs us to pay attention to the cognitive dimensions of understanding, further extended to include the citizens of the nation, it also assumes the singularity of unconscious.

Any such generalization fails to account for the overlapping and contradictory positions of the various viewing agents. The use of the term ‘agents’ here is deliberate, and is meant to bring to attention the agency of the citizen-spectator in relation to the film text as national text. Much of the work revolving around this assumption cannot capture the critical spectator, seeing them as passive receptors of what is displayed on screen. When we speak to the film text to extrapolate the state as the power-bloc that guides the spectator to hegemonic construct, we also reduce the spectator to a generalizable victim of false consciousness. There is of course, an undeniable subliminal collectivity that is generated by the medium, i.e., the darkness of the cinema hall, the spatial authority of the screen which through its scale, its ambient sounds dominate the theatre. But this darkness also engages the spectator by

⁸⁶ Joshi, *Bollywood’s India*, 2.

separating them from the audience as a unit to an individual, the vision is as though for the pleasure of the spectator alone. Of course, the spectator knows it is not so, that there are other members who are around him, but the experience of viewing is unlike that of being a crowd in a concert. The audience does not perceive itself as a group but as individuated viewers; in other words, a collective gathering of spectators is not the same as a unification of consciousness into a singular entity.

Joshi elaborates that the revisions, contestations and affirmations of modernity are all part of the “public fantasy” that is the popular Hindi film and that the Hindi blockbuster is a particularly key site for the articulation of desire. Film, not only supplements nationalist ideology, it morphs into a political ground wherein battles over democracy and modernity are fought. If one concedes that there exist linkages between the cinema and nation, yet this relationship is convoluted and may respond differently on different narrative registers and indices. There is a propensity to provide a selective account of the Hindi film as complementary to or an extension of the nation-state.

Impossible Histories

That there is no single objective historical truth, but several versions from different perspectives, is now a fairly well accepted maxim. But what are its implications for our attempts at writing a history of film? EH Carr in the *Idea of History* addresses this dilemma that lies at the heart of historiography. The concept of a positivistic and impressionistic history that can be read as a collection of facts, of monumental or significant events becomes increasingly suspect as new facts challenge the older ones or as we think about the nature of writing history. History is necessarily a selective writing of events. Further, as human and social endeavor, history is also inflected by

the prejudices of the time and the individuals who write it. History is a hermeneutic object. The answer to the question what is history “reflects our own position in time...and what view we take of the society in which we live.”⁸⁷ History driven by the “cult of facts” thus tends to forfeit the “element of interpretation” that “enters into every fact of history.”⁸⁸ In this sense, history changes based on who is writing it and cannot be treated as an objective report of the past. Paul Willemen in his critique of ‘Indian Literature’ as a label (or Cinema) argues that “a reference work is no different from a historical account: both construct what they purport to address.”⁸⁹

Taking a cue from attempts to write histories of literature, we could say that there are three kinds of history possible. One comprises little more than a list of films in a chronological order. The second consists of linking successive films through influence and influential figures. But in the case of cinema, influence is not easy to trace, nor is it crucial. It is true that there are pioneers and trend-setters, and many film makers follow them—some perhaps in a slavishly imitative manner, and some using the original as a basis for creative innovations. There is no linear thread of influence which we can use to narrate a true and cohesive history of films. The third approach might consist of an account of the conditions, times and circumstances of the making of particular films. But there are two problems with this approach. First, it is not clear how the conditions of creation constitute a history of creative works. Second, in a field like cinema, given its complex nexus of creativity, technology, market and socio-economic conditions, any account would be either comprehensive but chaotic or coherent but arbitrarily selective.

⁸⁷ E.H. Carr, *What Is History?* (London: Penguin, 1961), 8.

⁸⁸ Carr, *What Is History?*

⁸⁹ Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*, 9.

These being the inescapable problems of writing a history of cinema, it would seem too ambitious to imagine that a history of films in relation to the political history of a state and its people is even possible. But much more problematic is the assumption in such an attempt that there is a traceable link of influence, determination or mutual conditioning between films and the political conditions and prevailing ideologies at the time of the making of the film. As Jigna Desai and Rajinder Dudrah have argued, any writing on histories of Hindi cinema must confront the question of the archive—of not only what is present or missing in the archives, but the gaps in knowledge and understanding.⁹⁰ The archive is a scattered, disjointed body of knowledge—it does not necessarily lead us in one direction and particularly in the case of cinema, the sheer variety of films produce indicate the futility of building a singular narrative based on the archive. There are simply too many films of too many kinds and standards at any given point in time to allow us to come to an understanding of the relation between the state and cinema.

Olympia Bhatt and her work on the early figures in music indicates that there is a flaw in the archiving of cinematic practices and that there is a possible, little understood, history that is the history of the others involved in the cinematic process—a history of the technology and the technicians, of the actors and the sets—the many animate and inanimate factors that shape the work of art that is film.⁹¹ In this sense, we must not forget that film making, even at a modest level, is a collective project—it exists at the interface of technological possibilities, the skills of artists and artisans, the financial constraints, and the legal frameworks and social contexts that

⁹⁰ Rajinder Dudrah and Jigna Desai, *The Bollywood Reader* (McGraw-Hill Education (UK), 2008).

⁹¹ Olympia Bhatt, "Musical Beginnings and Trends in 1920s Indian Cinema", in *The Sound of Silent Films*, ed. Claus Tieber and Anna Katharina Windisch, 2014th ed. (London: Palgrave, 2014), 123–38, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137410726_8.

enable the distribution, release and reception of a film. Cinema is far more at the mercy of the fast-changing tastes of the audience for its reception, totally dependent on technological innovation for its form, and vulnerable to the vagaries of the market, than literature or arts such as a painting or sculpture. The success or even the possibility of release of a film depends on the market, on its potential to attract audiences, to pass the censor and other legal requirements and other people to whom it must appeal or who rely on the film for their bread and butter. This is not simply to mark the various individual histories of cinema, but also to track the inter-relations between these various factors and actors that compose the final product. Of course, this is not to say that many of these contingencies of the market, the economic considerations and availability of material that influence the production of films cannot be analyzed. The point is that such an effort would result in a series of individual analyses, and do not result in anything that can be called history. Further, it needs to be emphasized that the fact that cinema is an industry must be understood in all its implications. The industry is, in the case of cinema, the necessary condition of production. Given these manifold factors, one might wonder whether it makes sense to even contemplate the possibility of the history of cinema.

Finally, drawing analogy from the history of science, one could argue that there are at least two readings of history—an internal history and an external history.⁹² In linguistics also there is a similar distinction. The terms internal history refers to the study of the syntax, semantics and structure, while external history refers to the influence of social conditions on language formation. In the case of cinema, the

⁹² "Internal History", in *Wikipedia*, 26 October 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Internal_history&oldid=1051980968. See also Bence Nanay, 'Nanay, Bence. Internal History versus External History.', *Cambridge* 92, no. 2 (2017): 207-30., <https://doi.org/doi:10.1017/S0031819117000067>.

internal history is a history from within the industry—changes in form, in the shifting imagination, the guiding conceptual and aesthetic frameworks. External history would be that of the socio-political context—whether it is in terms of the economy, state processes or the biographical details of the film maker in whose mind (shaped by the events and experiences of their lives) the work was forged. As we have seen, issues of the empire, of globalization and liberalization's influence on cinema, belong largely in the latter category. There is also, in the case of cinema, another important factor which is that, as has been mentioned before, a film, though seemingly dictated by the singular figure of the director or the star status of the lead actor, is more collaborative than these biographical readings of stardom and auteurship suggest.

This is of course not to suggest that there is no relation between the two kinds of history. But no matter how imbricated the two are, they are distinct, and any attempt to mix them into one history will only result in an incoherent account. Several technologies and industries influence film and film auteurs thus shaping the multiple histories of cinema. These do not always cohere or converge with one another. Rather, one could say that cinema has no singular history and does not in this sense, tell a singular narrative of the nation. In this sense, any history of cinema is only a partial history of the field with multiple omissions, absences, parallel telling and the possibility of constant revision.

Coming to the particular putative relation between cinema and the nation, Paul Willeman in the preface to this book mentions Seamus Deane and Aijaz Ahmad who have both argued against the idea of a history, and particularly a history that relies on the concept of the nation-state. As Willeman himself summarizes the “legitimacy of a

category...would have to encompass such diverse histories... with constantly shifting boundaries that no single scholar can ever claim to practice the discipline.”

He further asserts that:

There is no sense of Indianness, nor of any other so-called national identity, that precedes the forms of historical and personal experience or expression given shape by particular, geographically and historically bounded institutions of government, by particular state forms providing and enforcing, and always necessarily falling short of doing so homogeneously, both geographical limits and social stratifications. Nations are retroactive, not retrospective constructions to which we are invited, often not very subtly, to adhere.⁹³

What is most important for us to remember then is that any claims of national and Indian identity that underlie the writing of the history of Hindi film Indian or national cinema, even if to present a critique of this usage will fall short of the many ways of writing about cinema. The concept of the nation has become profligate to the point of becoming endemic to the discipline. There is no discussion of Hindi cinema that does not begin with reference to the nation, with arguments that try to connect the history of culture and cultural participation with the history of the nation-state and its citizens. Even when engaged in criticism, this approach significantly diminishes the importance of viewing, understanding and enjoying cinema.

⁹³ Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*, 9.

Hindi Cinema, National Cinema : a critique

Rosie Thomas cautions against deterministic readings of film that tend to override the polyphony of forms that populate the genres and pleasures of the Hindi film. The construction of Hindi cinema as national cinema or even as Indian cinema is bound by the same paradox: it provides an account of national history and the ideological struggle over the idea of a nation through cinematic fantasy, thereby constructing the image of Hindi cinema as national cinema. This label can be misleading and even false in assuming that Hindi cinema, without exception, enacts or “impersonates” the nation. The sheer variety and hybridity of the art form, and the diverse influences of performance traditions, even the culture of auteurs and the parallel within the mainstream have been influential in the making of Hindi cinema. It invites our attention to be studied, not as the nation as imagined community bound by ideology through the very act of viewing, but to shatter the illusions of ‘a’ community. As Aijaz Ahmed asks “Is it, and at the same time to be free of any conception of art that is not at least implicitly essentialist and therefore subversive of the very idea and form of history.”⁹⁴ To fall for the assumption of Hindi cinema as national cinema is beset with the same slippage of mistaking historiography for historical revelation. Any theoretical model proposing the term ‘national’ to account for the pleasures of Hindi cinema and its recycled narratives ultimately re-enacts the crisis it proposes to resolve: of the dominance of Hindi film as Indian film. Moreover, the term ‘national’ is more suited to practices that are promoted and held up by the nation-state as examples of its triumph. Hindi cinema is only one of the many cinemas

⁹⁴ Ahmad, 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory' quoted in Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*.

that enjoy critical acclaim in the form of national film awards or are embraced by the governmental bodies and therefore could not be said to be national cinema.

To identify a national cinema is first of all to specify a coherence and a unity; it is to proclaim a unique identity and a stable set of meanings. The process of identification is thus invariably a hegemonizing, mythologizing process, involving both the production and assignation of a particular set of meanings, and the attempt to contain, or prevent the potential proliferation of other meanings. At the same time, the concept of a national cinema has almost invariably been mobilised as a strategy of cultural (and economic) resistance; a means of asserting national autonomy in the face of (usually) Hollywood's international domination.⁹⁵ The pleasures of cinema need to be disarticulated from the ideological motivations of the nation-state. The pleasures often have complete disregard for such origins relying on more affective sensations and the drama of expectations and resolutions or surprises. Identification and pleasures of film function exceed the idea of national imaginary.

The construction of Hindi cinema as national cinema or even as Indian cinema is bound by a paradox. It provides an account of the ideological struggle over the historically evolving idea of a nation through cinematic fantasy and through this act of recounting it actively constructing the image of Hindi cinema as national cinema, i.e., a cinema that represents the idea of a nation. There is no such thing as a national cinema just as there is no such thing as a nation standing by itself aloof from everything else. And while the ideological push to establish the latter as a concrete geographical entity is quite real, the same could not be said of the former. What evidence is there in the film industry community or even the texts themselves to

⁹⁵ A. Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema", *Screen* 30, no. 4 (1 December 1989): 37, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/30.4.36>.

establish themselves as Indian or national, barring a few exceptions? Can there be such a thing as Indian or national cinema at all? How much of cinema is directly linked to or even an allegory of the nation-state? This label can be misleading and false in assuming that Hindi cinema, without exception, enacts or impersonates the nation. As argued above, the sheer variety and hybridity of the art form, and the diverse influences of performance traditions, even the culture of auteurs and the parallel within the mainstream have been influential in the making of Hindi cinema, not to mention the diverse international influences which a distorted imagination sees the adaptation of as mimicry. It invites our attention to be studied, not only as the ideologue of the nation as imagined community but also as the agency that shatters the illusions of the community.

One of the most common, or even, the most common fallacy in cinema studies is to draw inferences about cinema and its relation to the state, society and politics on the basis of a vague notion of the popular, and the popularity or typicality of certain films as representative of the period, as films that represent a particular dominant artistic, formal sensibility and which represent the larger state processes as “historical evidence.”⁹⁶ But this leaves the question unanswered as to how we are to understand their popularity which exceeds the conjoining of the ambition of the state and the appeal of social films for the public. Further, the term ‘national’ is more suited to practices that are promoted by the nation-state. To assume otherwise is to assume that widespread popularity or possibility of distribution and production confer upon it the privileged status of being national. It is true, that Hindi cinema has a wider audience than regional cinema that is enjoyed by regional linguistic groups, but its linguistic

⁹⁶ M.K. Raghavendra, ‘Melodrama, Loyalty and the Nation’, Phalanx, n.d., http://www.phalanx.in/pages/article_i007_melodrama.html.

advantage does not translate to national hegemony.

To understand the sexual politics of cinema, for instance, is to begin with the premise that there are multiple interrelations in society, of which state is one minor part, with their own sets of power transactions—these include stratified spheres of civil society, technological and global influences and the movements and debates that are encountered in society, often disconnected from the idea of nation as a politico-cultural entity. By looking at the debates on sexuality and song in Hindi cinema, it posits that the scholarship has been overshadowed by the discourse on nation—including the grand narrative of its various ‘eras’ and the phenomenon of stardom that harks back to the nation. The cabaret has also been part of this narrative. By paying special attention to this dance form, and drawing the reader away from the theory on national cinema and women’s representation in cinema, the work reorients the debate towards a close analysis of the cabaret performance. The attempt is to understand film as an affective medium that is in constant dialogue with society in the broadest sense of the term, where in film “synonymy, metonymy, metaphor...are part of the primary terrain itself in which the social is constituted.”⁹⁷ Cinema as it appears before us does not merely reflect this society but actively constructs it, and is constructed by it. The idea of culture needs to be expanded beyond the notion of national cinema that only reiterates the culture industry argument in assuming that cinema imparts ideology upon the viewers who remain receptacles of the audio-visual medium either through contractual citizenship or through the ideological apparatus of the state.

⁹⁷ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (Verso Books, 2013), 110.

Defining the Hindi Film Song

Introduction

Hindi Cinema has been described as a melodramatic form that is somehow far in excess of the emotional, spectacular and narrative quotient of other cinemas, particularly, Hollywood. It is regarded as defying Hollywood genre classifications, often distinguished from other industries for its intermixing of several elements of action, song/dance, humour, tragedy in film. These spectacular sequences with numerous changes of costume, the dreamlike locations and surreal situations are said to constitute the main attraction of the film. Films hold together diverse narrative elements in a loose structure within its phantasm; it is a “cinema of attractions.”¹ The focus on the fantastical: ever shifting landscapes, absolute suspension of disbelief – in terms of locale, costumes etc. offers relief from the symbolic order that governs the rest of the film.²

Despite the presence and popularity of the Hindi film song, it has received very little attention. The Hindi film song, sometimes with its demand of suspension of disbelief, and its absurd temporal, spatial shifts has often been treated as a minor component of the film, with the narrative being the central entity. The films are populated by songs through the use of a format which enables rhythmic interludes to the story. At various junctures of the film, these can break or merge with the narrative

¹ Gunning, ‘The Cinema of Attraction[s]’.

² Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public*; Vijay Mishra, ‘The Aching Joys of Bollywood Song and Dance’, *Postcolonial Studies* 12, no. 2 (June 2009): 247–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790902905783>; Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 2–9; Rosie Thomas, ‘Indian Cinema: Pleasures and Popularity’, *Screen* 26, no. 3–4 (1 May 1985): 116–31, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/26.3-4.116>; Sangita Gopal, ‘The Audible Past, or What Remains of the Song-Sequence in New Bollywood Cinema’, *New Literary History* 46, no. 4 (2015): 805–22, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2015.0043>.

to sustain viewer engagement. Despite the apparent disconnect between realist narrative and fantasy in the film form, songs, though dubbed as elements of “interruption”, can also be crucial to the narrative, complicating this relationship, where the invasion of song is also an interface, a bridge with a significant role in the narrative order.³ The music reconstitutes the filmic image, adding new meanings in a complex layering of the film image and its sound. In Hindi cinema particularly, song is not a relief from or a side attraction to the film; it exists as a presence within diegesis and also as a strand of popular culture disarticulated from the film.

Songs are typical of Hindi cinema both in terms of the cinematic form and within the larger economy of cinema. In the broadest sense, sound refers to any audible element—music, noise, utterance—in the film. However, we shall focus here on song which is distinguished from the background score in its picturisation within the narrative. To put it simply, songs are where sound is foregrounded. As Jayson Beaster puts it: “a moment in the film in which the music is foregrounded, follows a clear song form, and has lyrics that are performed by vocalists.”⁴ In the film, song layers and defines the scene, it indexes and brings meaning to the image. It is employed to talk about a character’s inner emotions, desires and thoughts. They have such power that often the memories of film are linked to song performances. The music is not an addition to or subtraction from the filmic image but constitutes its meaning. The grammar of editing, choreography, sound, lyrics, composition, the cinematography, they all have only one aim which is to create a song sequence that plays its role in the totality of the filmic experience—whether in furthering the

³ Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*; Ciolfi Sabrina, ‘Popular Hindi Cinema: Narrative Structures and Points of Continuity with the Tradition’, 2012, 11.

⁴ Jayson Beaster-Jones, *Bollywood Sounds: The Cosmopolitan Mediations of Hindi Film Song* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), xiii, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199993468.001.0001>.

narrative, or to provide a pause for the viewer from it. Having said that, it could be said that a film song has a life and trajectory of its own beyond its role in the film.

This chapter seeks to disarticulate the film song from the film to argue for an independent reading of the song which goes beyond readings of its picturisation and place in the film's narrative. The *masala* film form primarily relied on tropes of attraction, with extravagant and ebullient sequences of song and action often folded into a familiar, melodramatic narrative. Probing this comfortable repetitiveness of the formula film, it has been suggested that the formula, instead of being berated for its lack of innovation should in fact be recognized for its function of folding the new into the old, i.e., infusing the familiar narrative with new kinds of political energies.⁵ The study of Hindi film is thus more than a study of mere formulaic extensions. The disconnect between song and narrative offers the possibility of slippery, contradictory readings on cinema. Song is one such site offering a parallel narrative to the narrative of the film.

In this context, two misconceptions need to be taken note of. The first relates to the concept of song as interruption and of Hindi film as constituted by such narrative breaks; the relation between song and narrative is a far more complex relationship, and the ubiquity of song-dance does not make it a necessary characteristic since even within so-called 'commercial' Hindi films, there are highly successful films made for popular consumption which dispensed with song, or used it in ways not anticipated or addressed by this argument. Further, and more importantly, this idea of interruption is generally of interest as opposite to realism, its displacement and lack of continuity evidence of its contrast.

⁵ Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film*.

Yet the view that this excess is somehow integrated into cinema in India is based on the average Hindi film with multiple songs, often original numbers produced solely for the film. It does not account for the conscious artistic efforts to incorporate the song into the narrative or films such as *Ittefaq* (1969), *Kalyug* (1981), *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* (1983) that did away with song altogether.⁶ Of course, the argument holds for most average Hindi films in that they often introduce song into the narrative. However, the point is not about the frequency of occurrence of songs in Hindi films. The important question is with regard to the view that song is just interruption of narrative. This view ignores the fact that songs are embedded into the narrative in varied ways, ranging from a gratuitous insertion (extreme case of which is an item song) to the weaving of the song into the tapestry of the narrative in a seamless way to enhance, to balance, to complexify the plot and the characters in many innovative ways. The only part that is counter to realism is simply the fact that people do not break into a song arbitrarily in real life. But seen that way, there are many things that are found in cinema, for that matter, any fiction—not just fantasy fiction—that would look odd in a real-life scenario. Speaking specifically about song, we must understand that songs are not like parentheses but more like different punctuation marks. They sometimes pause, sometimes regulate, sometimes highlight the flow of the narrative.

It is of course true that the popularity of film and the film song feed into each other with song exceeding the popularity of any other film component. The song is often used for the film's advertising and is what makes a film popular. It is possible to make a bad film with a successful soundtrack, but the vice-versa is rather difficult.

⁶ Yash Chopra, *Ittefaq*, Crime, Mystery, Thriller (NH Studioz, 1969); Shyam Benegal, *Kalyug*, Drama (Film-Valas, 1981); Kundan Shah, *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro*, Comedy, Crime, Drama (National Film Development Corporation of India (NFDC), 1983).

The 1954 film *Munna* which featured no songs bombed at the box office.⁷ Film makers in general have relied on the song and dance sequence for much public appeal, they have become part of the package of a Hindi film. They are some of the most profitable components of a film and can potentially influence the film's success. Recording sales are often some of the biggest selling points of a film.⁸ The appeal and reach of the Hindi film song creates a seemingly homogenous community. In the discourse of cinema studies, if the Hindi film is the site of national imaginary, the film song is the "national-popular" music.

On the other hand, the characterisation of song as "fantasy" "interruption" "excess" and "spectacle" implies the narrative is all there is to a film. This is once again an unreflective view. Song-dance has long been looked upon as an additive that does not contribute to the image or narrative. Jerrold Levinson's proposal on the role of music in narrative construction is important for us to understand the relationship between song-dance and film narrative. Levinson asks if the sequence constitutes narrative or it is extraneous to it.⁹ In the case of Hindi film, this poses an important question that also defines the way we understand and explicate the relationship between the two. Music is a crucial element of cinema's "narrative connotations, one that can be modulated to be both within and outside of the narrative and life of film."¹⁰

⁷ Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, *Munna*, 1954. See Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*.

⁸ Gregory D. Booth and Bradley Shope, eds., *Popular Music in India: Studies in Indian Popular Music* (Oxford University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199928835.001.0001>; Gregory D. Booth, 'Preliminary Thoughts on Hindi Popular Music and Film Production: India's "Culture Industry(Ies)", 1970–2000', *South Asian Popular Culture* 9, no. 2 (July 2011): 215–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2011.569075>; Peter Manuel, 'Popular Music in India: 1901–86', *Popular Music* 7, no. 2, (1988): 157–76, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/853534>; Peter Manuel, 'The Cassette Industry and Popular Music in North India', *Popular Music* 10, no. 2 (1991): 189–204, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/853060>.

⁹ Jerrold Levinson, 'Music as Narrative and Music as Drama', *Mind & Language* 19, no. 4 (2004): 428–41, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0268-1064.2004.00267.x>.

¹⁰ Kathryn Kalinak, *Film Music: A Very Short Introduction*, *Film Music: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press), 4.

The continuity and narrative build-up of song in films, and its presence as commodity detached from its role within the film are part of its meaning as is its integration or detachment from the story. The role of song as interruption is a more common approach to understand the melodramatic mode of Hindi or Indian cinema. This often detaches song from narrative and presents it as an “interruption”, a pause in the narrative; as reported, songs “explicitly distract the viewers from narrative flow and contradict the conventions of continuity editing.”¹¹ This theory presents an apparent disconnect between elements extraneous to and integrated into the narrative. They are understood as “more-or-less gratuitous insertions into the plot, to be enjoyed for their own sake.”¹² This view ignores that they interact in complex ways with the narrative, their integration is as much part of Hindi film narrative as is their presence as elements of attraction. In such cases, we need to pay attention to the individual instances of the way in which song is introduced into the narrative.¹³ There is a meaningful relationship between song and narrative that is often undermined in our analysis of song as attraction or interruption.

A film, like any work of art or literature, creates a world within a frame, with its own narrative, ambiance, tone, subliminal projection, its own kind of reality. Therefore, the view that the universe of Hindi cinema is characterized by the presence of song which is just a disjointed, suspended moment within the film is misplaced.¹⁴ The ‘excess’ represented by the song is often contrasted with the cinematic realism of

¹¹ Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*, 41.

¹² Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India*, Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 41, <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/C/bo3684199.html>.

¹³ Rick Altman, ‘Film Sound-All of It’, *Institute of Cinema and Culture Iowa*, Iris: A Journal of Theory on Image and Sound, 27, no. Spring 1999 (1999): 31–48.

¹⁴ Since film itself is a fantasy, the song-dance sequences are a fantasy within the fantasy; a fantasy dreamt by the characters or demanded by the situation.

Hollywood, where except for musicals, song and dance are hardly ever foregrounded in the film.¹⁵ On the other hand, there have been scholars of film studies who have argued persuasively that films are a complexly structured and layered series and combination of signs.¹⁶ They argue that these films are not to be dismissed as merely disconnected, inferior texts but should be treated as meaningful interactions between viewer and screen, as sites of reproduction and resistance of ideology. This approach, however, needs further analysis since it is simply false to suggest that all texts have the same degree of relationship to ideology and power. Due to the sheer variety of the texts, it would make more sense to speak of specific texts. The logic of induction cannot be applied to a work of art without a stretch of imagination that often ignores the nuances and sometimes evident differences in the relation of particular films.

¹⁵ The classification of films in neat genres assumes a consistency of form that could be captured by a definition. Yet, there are a number of films, both in Hindi and world cinema wherein these categories become blurry. Films such as Emile Ardolino, *Dirty Dancing*, Drama, Music, Romance (Great American Films Limited Partnership, Vestron Pictures, 1987); John Badham, *Saturday Night Fever*, Drama, Music (Paramount Pictures, Robert Stigwood Organization (RSO), 1977); Randal Kleiser, *Grease*, Comedy, Musical, Romance (Paramount Pictures, Robert Stigwood Organization (RSO), Allan Carr Production, 1978) are not categorised as musicals in the proper sense, despite the presence of songs that were integrated into the narrative. In this case, unlike the background score or soundtrack that is considered characteristic of Hollywood's mode of storytelling and its use of music, we find that the song is foregrounded as an element of the story. While, it may be argued that unlike this format, Hindi films use songs as an arbitrary break, or displaced from the story, there are also a number of films such as Subhash Ghai, *Karz*, Action, Musical, Romance (Mukta Arts, 1980); Vijay Anand, *Teesri Manzil*, Comedy, Musical, Mystery (Nasir Hussain Films, United Producers, 1966); Narendra Bedi, *Rafoo Chakkar*, Action, Comedy, Drama (M.I. Films, Nadiadwala Sons, 1975); Babbar Subhash, *Disco Dancer*, (1982), and countless such examples, in which the narrative is not a pretext for song, rather the characters as singers or dancers incorporate song not as interruptions but as integral to the role and the plot as realistic situations for the characters to perform. Within the same film, song could have several relationships to the narrative, it could be a break or a relief from the storyline and then find itself integrated. In a film like *Rafoo Chakkar* for instance, the roles of Neetu Singh and Rishi Kapoor as dancers demand the performance of some songs, such as *Dil Dena Buri Bala Hai* on the other hand, some scenes such as the song *Chuk Chuk Chak Chak* performed in the train are outside the narrative plot.

¹⁶ Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public*.

Section I: Hindi Film Song as Popular Music

Music has been integral to the oral cultures and theatrical traditions that predated and influenced cinematic form.¹⁷ The circumstances surrounding the industry, increased migration of artists, and the popularity of the form, all contributed to the development of the Hindi film song's eclectic, heterogenous style. It draws on influences from cultures both local and international, Jayson Beaster Jones reminds us that to assume that there is any link between Hindi film song and any localised and indigenous culture, or on the opposite spectrum, mimicking qualities of Indian music from western culture "makes little sense" since "the songs and their producers have always already been cosmopolitan in the broadest sense." Further, according to him, "producers of Indian cinema and its songs have always been trans locally oriented, and they write music and films that draw from different regions of South Asia *as much or more* than they draw from international sources."¹⁸ It is this heterogeneity of film music in India which makes any categorisation difficult.

What can be said with confidence is that film music is the most popular genre of music in the country, far surpassing the popularity of folk, classical or devotional songs. Initially, Hindi music became popular as *Lalita Sangit*: light, casual, easy-going music, unlike erudite forms such as classical music. It has received little scholarly attention since it was often seen as beneath serious consideration.¹⁹ If it has been mentioned at all, it was primarily as a sidenote to cinema. Despite its ubiquity within and outside film, it has only been considered in relation to the film text. The richness of its form and its existence outside the domain of the film warrants separate

¹⁷ Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*.

¹⁸ Beaster-Jones, *Bollywood Sounds*, 2015, 11.

¹⁹ Anna Morcom, *Hindi Film Songs and The Cinema*.

attention. Hindi film song is a possible area of study quite independent of the film, part of but not entirely constituted by it.

Song as Difference: Hindi Film and the 'West'

Gregory Booth in *More than Bollywood* reminds us that, "Hindi cinema is song and dance cinema and its music is the popular music industry in the country."²⁰

The study of song and dance can greatly inform our understanding of Hindi films.

Album sales of film songs often surpass the sales of any other genre of music.²¹ The

sheer reach and audience of Hindi film music speaks to us of its attraction. It is often

regarded as a unique feature of the Indian film, inviting comparisons with cinematic

practices in the 'west'. Peter Manuel, for instance, writes that

While Indian film song functions as a realistic music in the sense that the song is generally performed by the actor on screen, it differs from both the realistic and functional manifestation of music in western films by its peculiarly inseparable role in the total cinematic experience.²²

This is further attested to by William Beeman who suggests that "in Indian

film, in contrast to western film, music plays a role equal to other cinematic

elements."²³ Manuel's remark sets up a distinction between the Hindi film's

differences with the functional music of films from the west. Barring the universalism

of this approach which tends to ignore the variety of uses to which music is put in the

Hindi film, his work is also a reminder that the study of Hindi film music invariably

²⁰ Gregory D. Booth and Bradley Shope, eds., *More Than Bollywood: Studies in Indian Popular Music*, Illustrated edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²¹ In the year 1985, for instance, at the peak of 'cassette culture', film songs constituted 80% of all the music sold. This has been consistent since the initial popularisation of the film song. (Narendra Sharma, 'half a century of song' *Cinema Vision India* 1.4 (1980) 58.

²² Peter Manuel, *Popular Music of the Non-Western World: A Historical Survey*, 171–85.

²³ William O. Beeman, 'The Use of Music in Popular Film: East and West', *Society for Visual Anthropology Newsletter* 4, no. 2 (September 1988): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1525/var.1988.4.2.8>.

leads to comparisons with the so-called ‘west’. Beeman also reflects this position when he further goes on to state that in the Hindi film “music has an expressive equivalence to speech...the artificial “break” which is felt in the West when an actor bursts into song is thus less apparent to the Indian viewer.”²⁴ But we must be careful as to what we imply in such statements. The Indian viewer is not surprised by an actor breaking into song on the screen, but it is not because he sees people breaking into song around him on the streets. He is not surprised because when he sits down to watch a Hindi film, he is aware the conventions of Hindi cinema and is prepared for it. It is no different from a viewer not being surprised by dragons talking to humans in a fantasy film. The very nature of art, even popular art which is made with the intent towards financial success and therefore, follows certain patterns that have proven to be exciting to the audience entails that to return to an essentialist position on art in geographical terms or in totalising theories is bound to raise doubt.

These arguments, inasmuch as they are founded on the difference of the Hindi film industry with Hollywood, reinstates the post-colonial difference that goes into the founding of fixed ideas about cultures and art forms. In this sense, the popularity and ubiquity of songs in the Hindi film needs to be rearticulated, to be understood not merely as an attractive ‘feature’ of the Hindi film differentiating it from so-called western cinema but also as a complex feature with its own convoluted relationship to the film.

As stated above, the comparison between the Hindi film and other industries is foregrounded as the starting point for many investigations into the Hindi film song in which the song figures as a crucial distinguishing marker for the film, moulded as

²⁴ Beeman, 82–83.

contrast to the west. It ruptures the narrative flow, unlike American cinema where it is seen as a more “realistic and functional manifestation of music.” Discussion on Hindi film inevitably reverts to its formulaic use of song/dance sequences as part of cinema’s “constellation of interruptions”, which draws on a non-realist plot structure and frequent suspension of narrative within the film to provide a multi-diegetic text.²⁵ The idea that Hindi film is a constellation of interruptions is used to explain the song and dance sequence, how it is displaced in space and time, and its breaks with continuity editing. Gopalan argues that “overtly exhibitionistic song-dance sequences break the codes of realism on which psychoanalytical voyeurism relies.”²⁶ In this sense, it is also seen as non-realism, its interruption becomes a site of its counter to the narrative continuity of Hollywood editing.

However, we must note that the structure of Hollywood cinema depends on realism for the sustenance of its fantasy, the absence of recognizing technological alienation as a way of hiding the technological construction of filmic fantasy and reducing the distance between camera and spectator such that the spectator is already complicit and interpellated by a concealed camera that sustains voyeurism. This view presupposes the mystification of the technology that makes the image possible. It ignores the recognition of it as fantasy in the audiences’ minds. The pleasure of the camera lies not in the audience’s idea of being absent- or not to be seen, but as a mode of address, involving even enjoyment and recognition. The fantasy of cinematic possibilities is sustained, enjoyed and made pleasurable rather than hidden. The aura surrounding cinematic technology and the pleasures of what it can do often figure as an extension of the experience of the film—spectators derive pleasure from the

²⁵ Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*.

²⁶ Gopalan, 10.

recognition of technological possibilities as evidenced by the fact that people watch with great interest videos showing how certain special effects were created.

Cinema, Song and the National-popular

The association of Hindi film with the film song is also part of the global branding of the Hindi film culture. The term ‘Bollywood’ has become associated with a host of extra-diegetic cultures that refer back to cinema such as dance, singing competitions, fashion shows through this we can see that the relationship between song and cinema is also ossified as unquestionably connected as the culture of a nation. Within the country as well, songs have been “the first mass-mediated forms of Indian Popular Culture to permeate daily life through official and unofficial circuits of distribution and transmission.”²⁷ The popularity of song in cinema is two-fold: in the first instance, it is the branding of the Hindi film as song and dance film, the second is the reach of film music as an independent form of popular culture. Jayson Beaster Jones states that:

Like popular music traditions everywhere, Indian songs reflect the values of the era in which they are produced and recorded. Not only do they recreate memories for those who lived in that era, but they also represent the values of that era for later generations.²⁸

It is regarded that the Hindi film music is “national-popular” culture on account of its distribution among a country-wide, heterogenous audience and also since the term designates the status of Hindi film music as representational of its times, As Jones comments above, it is generally assumed that popular culture reflects the values of its era, in this case the song. The role, according to Jones, is to

²⁷ Majumdar, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s*.

²⁸ Beaster-Jones, *Bollywood Sounds*, 2015, 8.

reconstruct the moments when they were released for new listeners but also for the listeners of its time. Jones states that film music composition “was characterized by the social, economic, and technological structures that supported a particular set of compositional practices.”²⁹ And thus, from the 40s to mid-90s, it was determined through its place in a particular historical period. This historical deterministic view has been common to most studies on song and dance, and even informal narratives on song and dance in Indian cinema. Consider Sanjay Kak’s introduction to the first song special released by *Cinema Vision India*. In his article, he claims that the film music represents “changing emotional history” of the country and its people. These scholars consider music to be the “iconic index of the entire period.”³⁰ These arguments assert that there is a causal relationship between the music of an era and its history.

Furthermore, these histories are a composite of events at the level of national history and of people’s perceptions and anxieties as they attempt to confront and resolve their histories and their struggles with the state. Sound is a signifier that indicates its belonging to a particular historical period. This argument takes a deterministic view of history as responsible for the production of cultural artefacts, it reduces the diverse pleasures of the song by forcing it into the narrow confines of a historical period.

While, it could be said that due to certain historical limitations—the range of distribution, instruments and musical styles available, one can potentially discern the era to which a song belongs, there is always the scope of been proven wrong for the simple reason that the evolution of music is not linear, it does not move forward as history does, rather it is involved in a complex dance with its own form—sometimes referring back to itself, sometimes part of the intertextual network of musical

²⁹ Jayson Beaster-Jones, *Bollywood Sounds: The Cosmopolitan Mediations of Hindi Film Song* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 113, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199993468.001.0001>.

³⁰ Sanjay Kak, ‘The Golden Age of Hindi Film Music’, *Cinema Vision India* 11, no. 11 (24 February 1986).

practices. It is difficult to give precise meaning to the idea—leave alone illustrating it—how the music of a particular period is *representative* of the period. The signification of music needs to be understood not in terms of grand historical narratives, but in terms of a song's narrative while acknowledging the limitations of confining the meaning of a song to the film in which it appears; music echoes across places, time-periods, and sometimes even the films themselves. When Booth refers to Hindi film songs as “the closest we can come to a national- popular music”, there is a fusion of the mode and reach of music distribution, with its status as representational of the listeners it reaches.³¹ Any community founded on the transient interest in the song, is in fact counter to the logic of the nation that tends to bind communities in unassailable pacts with its own history. The very transience of music offers us an opportunity to rethink the relationship of popular culture to history and the state. This structuralist view does not clearly illustrate the relationship of the people to popular culture, and particularly popular music.

Here, let us take a moment to explore the term “national-popular”. The term has evolved from the Gramscian concept on the nature of hegemony wherein people come to identify a certain culture as national symbol. This concept is close to the concept of national imaginary that we have discussed earlier. As stated earlier, the theories that link Hindi cinema and its cinematic practices as national symbols often disregard the diversity and shifting meaning of these products for the people. According to Oxford Dictionary of English ‘national’ has two primary meanings. One as relating to or characteristic of a nation; common to a whole nation, and two as owned, controlled, or financially supported by the state—by this logic, art cinema was

³¹ Booth, *Behind the Curtain*, 18. She claims that the synthesis of many regional forms into its own syncretic blend represents its nationalist characteristic.

more national in character than commercial Hindi film which is neither common or dominant across the nation (despite its significant and overarching presence), nor controlled by the state except for censorship, which is a limited degree of—eliminate but not additive—control over content. The idea that Hindi films and Hindi film music dominate the nation (or are relevantly connected to the political history of the state) disregards or undermines the role of regional music and film industries and reiterates the hegemony of the Hindi film as dominant cinema.

Secondly, what do we mean by popularity when hyphenated with the term national?

What is popular across some, or even many, or most states of the country is not necessarily national, to assume it were so and begin with this premise is an act of producing the national dominance of Hindi film rather than a reference to a pre-existing concept of the nation as a community imagined by and through cinema. If songs can be national-popular just on account of being known or sold across the country there is no reason to exclude music from other cultures which may become just as popular, would those then be characterised as national? This category itself is a bit problematic since the popularity of film music exceeds the boundaries of nation and not only for the diaspora, and thereby cannot be conjoined or collapsed into one hyphenated definition/claim. More importantly, it is important not to conflate or use interchangeably the terms ‘country’ and ‘nation’. Pan-Indian does not mean national. This becomes emphatically clear in the context of language debates. As we all know, when attempts are made to designate Hindi as ‘national language’, there is vehement resistance from several regions, particularly south India. They argue that even if Hindi were a pan-Indian language—which it is not—it still would not automatically become national language. A country-wide phenomenon is not a national phenomenon.

History of Film Song

Song-less Silent Cinema

Film Song became possible with *Jazz Singer* (1929), though it was *Melody of Love* (1929) screened at Elphinstone Palace that became the first sound film to be released in India.³² Sound has long been part of the motion-picture with efforts having been made to incorporate the auditory with visual technology even in earliest experiments. But in order to be seamlessly successful, it needed a more advanced technology. At the time, sound would be recorded separately in a studio due to the inability to edit out background sounds and disturbances, the reels for music and video were separate and the sound would often be out of sync. When the technology became available, the transition to synchronized image-sound happened quickly.

Since the inception films in the form of silent motion-pictures, it has been accompanied by music.³³ The silent film featured music to bring emotive expression or add dimension and depth to the on-screen image. Due to technical limitations of synchronising sound and image, films were played with a live orchestra until the popularity of ‘talkies’ in 1929.³⁴ Evolution of sound-on-disc³⁵ technology allowed filmmakers to produce and record sound independently before it was played. This system was far from perfect and the slightest error in synchronisation could ruin the

³² Alan Crosland, *The Jazz Singer*, Drama, Music, Musical (Warner Bros., 1928); Arch Heath, *Melody of Love*, Drama, Romance (Universal Pictures, 1928); AshleyCoates, ‘India’s First Talkie Presentation – Melody of Love’, *Madan Theatres Research Group* (blog), 9 August 2015, <https://madantheatres.com/2015/08/09/indias-first-talkie-presentation-melody-of-love/>.

³³ Rick Altman, ‘The Silence of the Silents’, *The Musical Quarterly* 80, no. 4 (1996): 648–718, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/742402>.

³⁴ Though there have been experiments with sound in the motion picture preceding this period, many of them had little reach and were largely just that, experiments but by 1929, it had become a popular format

³⁵ Sound-on-disc technology was the recording of sound onto a record or gramophone disc. This was to be played separately in sync with the screening.

experience of the film. This technology had limited success since it was both expensive and risky though it produced better sound than the sound-on-film technology which directly recorded sound onto the film reel. Evolution of the latter made it standard practice within the film industry by the late 30s.

The Silent film era incorporated song into the film by hiring artistes who would sing along in the theatre during the screening. Background music also was similarly managed. Orchestra was employed by theatres to play along the motion picture according to the narration on-screen. String orchestra played an important role in developing “signature sound.”³⁶ Compositions from the silent film era would later come to shape the standardization of certain tunes as associated with certain emotions/sequences. Directors, like in the case of Ardeshir Irani, also composed their own music and sent it to be played with the film, which became possible with the new technology of recording sound on gramophone records. There could be a narrator to explain the events of the film or provide commentary, or bands to provide musical accompaniment. In the case of travelling theatres, local artistes, singers and instrumentalists were hired to sit in a pit in front of the audiences and provide live music to the film as it played in an open ground or in a tent.³⁷

³⁶ Allison Arnold, ‘Hindi Film Git: On the History of Commercial Indian Popular Music’ (Illinois, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, 1991), 166.

³⁷ Vijayakar, *The History of Indian Film Music*.

Birth of Film Song



Figure 1: *Alam Ara* (1931) note the promotion of the film as “all talking, singing and dancing.” Not only does this signal the modern equipment that makes sound and movement possible, but also the fascination with song that characterises Indian performance cultures. Mumbai Mirror, ‘No Print of Alam Ara Available’, *Times Group*, 15 March 2016, <https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/no-print-of-alam-ara-available/articleshow/51401240.cms>.

The first sound film in the Hindi film industry was Ardeshir Irani’s 1931 film *Alam Ara* (Ornament of the World). Irani was inspired to produce a talkie after watching *Showboat* at Bombay’s Excelsior Theatre. It was promoted as a “100% all talking, singing, dancing” film. The release of *Alam Ara* helped establish the Hindi film as the song-dance spectacle for which it is known today. The film was based on a Parsi tale written by Joseph David and starred Zubeida and Master Vitthal. It was released in Majestic Theatre Bombay under Imperial house production house and its song “De de khuda ke naam pe Pyaare” became widely popular. It was sung by Wazir Mohammed who played a singing fakir in the film, the song was sung live on film as there was no system for playback singing. *Alam Ara* used a Tanar Sound system that recorded sound directly onto film. Actors were required to wear heavy microphone

equipment as they moved around and spoke, while instrument players hid in the background to avoid being seen as they performed. The Tanar system was considered quite inferior and though extremely popular, the film sound is likely to have been poorly recorded.

Films such as *Indrasabha* (1932) were composed with over 40 songs, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that the plot appears to be merely an excuse for song and dance.³⁸ It has to be noted though, that song and dance come from a much older tradition of performance in the country and rather than being a relief from the plot can often be integral to the plot, they can be modes of telling the story itself. For instance, some of the songs in earlier films were no more than couplets, a kind of lyrical dialogue, very much like poetry-narrative form from which they drew.

The inclusion of song and dance in the Hindi film carried the influence of various forms of entertainment performed in the country before motion pictures arrived. Cinematic practices in their inception saw little difference between the screen and the stage, and the standardised practices of one came to influence the other. Parsi and Marathi theatre, tamasha, nautanki, qawwali, ghazal/ mystical/devotional practices all had an immense influence on the making of Hindi film song and dance spectacle.

Early film music was inspired by regional theatre and drew on their familiar idiom, combining drama, music and dance as narrative devices. Songs can be traced to various traditions such as Parsi Theatre and other popular modes including contemporary theatre, as well as various urban and folk cultures, like *Nautanki*,

³⁸ J. J. Madan et al., *Indrasabha*, Musical, Romance (Madan Theatres, 1932).

Tamasha, *Marathi Theatre*, and *Bengali Jyatra*.³⁹ They continued to thrive on folk music traditions and many of the local sounds found their way into films, partly due to their popular appeal but also because of the migration of artists aiming for a career in the industry.

When a new Indian theatre began to develop in the nineteenth century, these folk-drama forms exerted an immediate influence: a vast tradition of song and dance was available to the new theatres. When the sound film appeared, this same reservoir pressed strongly on it.⁴⁰

Since performance styles were inherited from the stage and local folk forms, Hindi film drew extensively on mythology for content, while the Parsi theatre was incorporated through elaborate setting of a proscenium and interspersion of song into the narrative, which had its antecedents in folk performance art⁴¹. They relayed a format already familiar to the audience by bringing the language of theatre onto the screen.

In 1948, The film *Kalpna* by Uday Shankar became the first film that featured dancers as protagonists. The story of a young dancer who dreams of opening his dance academy featured abundant surreal performances by Uday Shankar and his companion, dancer Amala Shankar. This premise gave room for abundant song and dance sequences which could be integrated into the narrative. The highly experimental feature exploited the possibilities of the medium to play with images and

³⁹ Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*. See also Chidananda Das Gupta, 'Indian Cinema Today', 2005; Ashok D Ranade, *Hindi Film Song: Music beyond Boundaries*, New Delhi: Promilla & Co. Publishers in association with Bibliophile South Asia, 2006.

⁴⁰ Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 72.

⁴¹ Kathryn Hansen, 'Mapping Melodrama: Global Theatrical Circuits, Parsi Theater, and the Rise of the Social', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 7 (17 May 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974927616635931>; Philip Lutgendorf, 'Is There an Indian Way of Filmmaking?', *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 10, no. 3 (6 August 2007): 227–56, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11407-007-9031-y>; Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public*, 35–36; Hameeduddin Mahmood and Khushwant Singh, *The Kaleidoscope of Indian Cinema*, 1974.

sounds, alternating between the stage and dream-like sequences. Early cinema largely approached the film as an extension of the stage, pioneers such as V. Shantaram and Uday Shankar changed this greatly by incorporating camera angles and visual effects. Shankar's background as a dancer and painter helped his vision to create a cornucopia of effects in his films, which were far more abstract and visually experimental than the work of his contemporaries.

The medium of film opened up new possibilities for the picturisation of dance which could now use space, graphics and camera angles to turn the gaze of the audience towards the specificities of the performance, bringing a whole new dimension to the art form. This film is an example of the status of classical dance in the industry, its extensive choreography drew on a breadth of traditions such as the Manipuri dance, Bharatnatyam, as well as folk dance forms.



Figure 2: Image of a sequence from *Kalpana* (1948). Beyond the motifs of the classical dancers and the hasta-mudra (hand-pose), we can see how the technology of the camera was turned towards the production of the new image vocabulary made possible by cinema. Source: Bioscope Movies, “*Kalpana* (1948) Uday Shankar Amala Shankar (Full Movie with Subtitles”, Youtube, 2 hrs, 32 min and 16 sec, November 2021 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kd8I0gOktaM>

The more important fact to be noted in this connection is that the constant borrowing and adapting of the various performance styles distinguishes film from other cultural practices of entertainment, marking it as a mass cultural form that readily transgressed the bounded idioms of classical music and dance. In cinema as speech was often versified as in plays, the dialogues would be recited as poetry. It drew on the breadth of Urdu, Marathi and classical traditions, using Hindustani language, flowery lyrics and the variety of scenes, costumes and movements that filled the aural-visual space of the screen.

Just as cinematic practices have drawn from folk traditions, songs in particular have borrowed forms from such practices. They often relied on *ragas* which was a

familiar musical language.⁴² But unlike classical music, which required both a trained voice and a trained ear, the Hindi film song adjusted itself in the space between the classical and the folk, its primary purpose being unapologetic entertainment. The Hindi film song thus found a new space for itself in popular performance cultures as it drew on the ones before.

The Separation of the Voice-image: Singer-actor Split

Earlier songs were written for the stage, and the same writers wrote for films later. The same is true about composers and other artists and technicians such as set designers and so on. Singers often came from performance background such as from other gharanas, or were courtesans, and were often trained in classical practices. This is also reflected in the form of the Hindi film song which largely drew on classical systems such as Hindustani and Carnatic music apart from other prevalent musical traditions such as qawwali, ghazal and Punjabi folk. Due to the technical limitations of the time, songs were sung live, as they would be on a stage, and recorded directly to the film. In the time preceding song synchronisation, it was the actor that often played both singer and dancer. Songs, sung largely by the actors themselves, often became associated with the actor, some of whom (such as Kundan Lal Saigal, Devika Rani) became quite popular as singers. By the year 1935 it had become standard practice to include sound in films and films without song were rare.

This phase was dominated by the actor-singer, who often performed both functions in film, beginning the reign of multi-talented actor-singers such as Noor Jahan, K.L. Saigal, Krishna Chandra Dey, Ashok Kumar, Kanan Devi to name a few. It would be much later after the coming of playback that the singers came to be

⁴² M. K. Raghavendra, *Seduced by the Familiar: Narration and Meaning in Indian Popular Cinema*, 1st edition (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2014), 264–65.

recognized in their own right, some of them even acquiring something of a star status. Before this, composers and music directors had already gained some traction. The composers also came generally from *gharanas* and enjoyed patronage.⁴³ With the studio system, the star system also took a stronger hold as stars were often contractually bound to certain studios, the star system had its own impact on song as singers came to be associated with certain actors, their voices often providing the voice for the star.

With Raichand Boral (R.C. Boral), the son of Lal Chand Boral, playback singing was introduced in cinema. The songs of the film *Dhoop Chaaon* (1935) were sung by KL Saigal, who became the first artist to gain wide popularity, making him the first singing star.⁴⁴ Saigal though not trained in classical music, was known for having gained graceful mastery of its singing style.

By 1955, playback singing by a separate artist who provided the voice had become the norm, and Hindi film music had overtaken other musical presentations such as concerts. Despite this growing recognition, the record credited on-screen characters and not the singer-actors. As song moved from improvisation to recorded sound—scoring, direction became possible. Song could then be standardized, and artistes could be known through their song, as their rendition became the one associated most closely with the film.

⁴³ Booth, *Behind the Curtain*.

⁴⁴ P C Barua, *Dhoop Chaaon*, 1935.

Popularity and Distribution of the Hindi Film Song

Gramophones, radios, cassettes have played a very important role in development of the musical form. Technology has been crucial to global musical interconnections, exchanges, responses, tributes and mimicries, and has made possible the dissemination of musical production in the broadest form from the days of exclusive LPs to current technologies of home production. Piracy and the internet have enabled access to listening and creating music in ways that uproot the song from the studio setting.

The Recording Industry Emerges

The invention of Edison Cylinder Phonograph in 1880s made music recording possible. The commercialisation of sound begins with HMV, which was founded as The Gramophone company by E Berliner who was the inventor of gramophone in 1898. At the time that the record label was revamped as His Master's Voice (HMV), recording was a long and arduous process involving eight steps. Soon after the launch, Frederick Gaisberg and his brother undertook a venture recording music internationally. In that connection, they arrived in Calcutta, India in September 1902 and were soon invited to a merchant's house at Harrison Road. Here, they witnessed a performance by Gauhar Jaan. She would become the first singer-performer to release a commercial song.⁴⁵ This was followed by a recording of over 1000 classical artists, theatre practitioners and *nautch* girls. In a span of less than two decades, there were over 75 brands and labels in Indian market. Artists were not bound by 'exclusive

⁴⁵ The first recording which took place on the 8th of November 1902 featured Shoshimukhi and Fanibala. See 'Tracing a Century of HMV, the Label Which Laid the Foundation of Indian Music Industry-Art-and-Culture News , Firstpost', Firstpost, 19 September 2020, <https://www.firstpost.com/art-and-culture/tracing-a-century-of-hmv-the-label-which-laid-the-foundation-of-indian-music-industry-8823841.html>.

contracts' and recorded for various companies, sometimes a different rendition of the same song.

The expansion of recording industries played an enormous role in the popularisation of music. With the release of *Achhut Kannya* in 1936, HMV discovered the large market for film music. At the time, due to the material and expense required for vinyl recording, music remained inaccessible for most of the public except in theatre halls. This changed with the radio.

Coming of Radio

Hindi film songs became a regular feature on the radio with the launch of 'Vividh Bharati', an exclusive music channel.⁴⁶ By the 40s, film music was already dominating the music market. At the same time, the channels refused to credit the films whose songs were being played and this led many filmmakers to withdraw from the All-India Radio.

In 1952, the Radio Broadcasting service decided to ban the airtime of Hindi film songs on the grounds that they were banal and non-educational, and sought to replace them with classical music. Balakrishna Vishwanath Keskar (B.V. Keskar), the then-minister for Information and Broadcasting cut down the playtime for film music and instead promoted classical music, poetry and other elitist forms. He established the *natya* academy with Pt. Ravi Shankar. All India Radio was quickly snubbed by the public in favour of Radio Ceylon from Sri Lanka that continued to host Hindi songs for its listeners.⁴⁷ This moment then speaks to us of the popularity of film music among the public on one hand, the government's disregard, even disdain, for film

⁴⁶ Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*.

⁴⁷ Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*.

music on the other. This disregard was partly an outcome of the post-independence attempt to revive interest in classical Indian culture. As an agent of development, the radio was seen as an important tool for the dissemination of ideas and for what one might call cultural education of the populace.⁴⁸

Approximately at the same time as the Censor Board established a new censorship policy, the introduction of western technology began to revolutionize the film song recording industry. In 1948, magnetic recording machines and sound tapes were introduced to India and technology led to shifts in the form of the Hindi film song. Gregory booth provides a detailed account of technology as a crucial part of the history of Hindi film music, one which affected its practices. According to him, with technological development came the production of new sound and on-screen movement. 1930s productions saw a shift in “cinematographic technique, vocal timbre, song structure.”⁴⁹ The visual and musical representations share a relationship of mutual exchange and reciprocity. It is evident that technological changes affected the quality and kind of sounds that were produced. Further, improvement in camera technology meant that new ways of shooting were now available. Unlike the *tableau* format that had descended from theatre and became necessary as cinematic technology did not allow for much manipulation of angles, scenes etc., new technology enabled the movement of actors on screen. By 1970, stereophonic sound in cinema halls would have a huge impact on the sound in motion pictures as they allowed for an immersive experience.⁵⁰ The stereophonic sound was particularly

⁴⁸ Vebhuti Duggal, ‘Imagining Sound through the Pharmaish: Radios and Request-Postcards in North India, c. 1955–1975’, *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 9, no. 1 (1 June 2018): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974927618767270>.

⁴⁹ Gregory D. Booth, ‘Synchronicity and Continuity of Sound and Image in Early Indian Cinema’, *South Asian Popular Culture* 15, no. 2–3 (2 September 2017): 109–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2017.1407537>.

⁵⁰ Teri Skillman, ‘The Bombay Hindi Film Song Genre: A Historical Survey’, *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 18 (1986): 142, <https://doi.org/10.2307/768525>.

useful for 70 mm films (although this technology was not very successful commercially) since the screen was often too large to accommodate the syncing of on-screen character and sound—the sounds seemed to come from far away, stereo sound allowed for audio immersion. In the music industry, one of the most relevant contributions of technological development was the introduction of cassettes that made music accessible to a large number of people.

Cassette Industry

By the 60s, cassettes began to flood the market. Technological reproduction provided a portable and inexpensive way of listening to and sharing music. Prior to this, playing music was limited by the expensive technology used which only the very rich could afford. Other avenues of listening to music was the radio which did not provide for choice—listeners could not choose the music played (except as *farmaish*, in which case it was the individual whose song was selected, and even this was limited).⁵¹ The cassette technology created a whole industry of the private enjoyment of music, and an increased privatisation of the commodity as home listening gained in popularity. By the 70s, record sales had nearly tripled, in March 1982 alone, the sales went from 50,000 to 1,40,000.⁵² Alison Arnold states that the playing of cassettes replaced folk music, regional music which had some popularity prior to the cassette industry was increasingly supplanted film music. However, Arnold's claim if taken as it is, is misleading for two reasons—for one, replacement assumes that folk music was ousted from musical circles, this is of course false, since though film songs became increasingly popular, there has always been a market for regional music, some of this regional music lifted the tunes of the songs and set them to their own lyrics bridging

⁵¹ For a discussion of the nature of reception and requests on radio see Duggal, 'Imagining Sound through the Pharmaish'.

⁵² Beaster-Jones, *Bollywood Sounds*, 2015.

the popularity of film with folk. Secondly, with the evolution of cassette technology, it also became possible to record folk music, which became another genre of music, albeit less popular and often regional, rather than being succeeded by film music. The correct way to state this phenomenon would be to say that live performances of folk music and other popular forms of music diminished due to the emergence of cassette technology.

Peter Manuel's term uses the term "cassette culture" to accommodate the study of circulation of this technologically enabled phenomenon that transformed cultural production and experience. By centralising the relationship between economy, technology and culture, his work traces the evolution of the cassette industry from the 70s to the 90s. He notes that the music industry also underwent shifts particularly in the 80s when they began to bid on film soundtracks. This is attested to by other film historians who note that with the cassette, the industry began to further commodify songs, which became potential sources of considerable revenue. Vijayakar notes the popularity of the music of films that were not particularly successful at the box office, such as *Mera Naam Joker* (1970), *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* (1978), *Mere Jeevan Saathi* (1972) and *Umrao Jaan* (1981).⁵³ The advertising of the film was also connected to the songs, and cassette sales became markers of the film's success. Soon after, the release of the Walkman and the compact disc further privatised listening to music, this time in public spaces as well.

⁵³ Rajiv Vijayakar, *The History of Indian Film Music: A Showcase of the Very Best in Hindi Cinema* (New Delhi: The Times Group Books, 2010), 21; Ravikant Nagaich, *Mere Jeevan Saathi*, Drama, Adventure, Action (Shilpkar, 1972); Raj Kapoor, *Satyam Shivam Sundaram: Love Sublime*, Drama, Romance (R.K. Films Ltd., 1978); Muzaffar Ali, *Umrao Jaan*, Drama, Musical, Romance (Integrated Films, S K Jain & Sons, 1981); Raj Kapoor, *Mera Naam Joker*, Comedy, Drama (R.K. Films Ltd., 1970).

Music Today

Music industry post-80s saw remarkable changes. By the 90s, channels such as *MTV* that played music all day had already emerged. With *MTV* also grew an indigenous pop music industry which came with its own promotional music videos, and songs from across the English-speaking world found their way on Indian TV screens.⁵⁴ New music now also relies on the technology of sound production, for instance the remix, which according to Gokulsing and Dissanayake, was “made for a new generation.”⁵⁵ According to them, remixes offer a radical reconfiguration of post-colonialism through its imitative, idealising yet removed play with the original. Manuel notes in agreement that new music syncretizes and reinterprets old and new elements in a distinctive metaphorical expression. This Benjaminian thesis is also supported by Duggal who suggests that the remix offers a glimpse into modernity characterised by speed and imitation.⁵⁶ Jayson Beaster Jones notes the continuity of the remix from the music of RD Burman, who according to him, “was already operating with a cosmopolitan aesthetic that aligns well with contemporary neoliberal musical values.” He suggests that the fusion of various musical genres and styles in his work “foreshadowed the values of remix in ways that have been facilitated by technologies available to mainstream producers”, although it would be unfair to club the remix phenomenon with RD Burman’s international range in his compositions.⁵⁷

It is of course true that this determinative influence of technology extended to the visual language of cinema. The technology of distribution also affected the

⁵⁴ Beaster-Jones, *Bollywood Sounds*, 2015, 111.

⁵⁵ Moti K. Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Indian Cinemas* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013).

⁵⁶ Vebhuti Duggal, ‘The Hindi Film Song Remix: Memory, History, Affect’, *MPhil Thesis*, accessed 3 May 2022,

https://www.academia.edu/21653454/The_Hindi_Film_Song_Remix_Memory_History_Affect.

⁵⁷ Beaster-Jones, *Bollywood Sounds*, 2014, 111.

presence of song in the narrative. Since this technological transition facilitated the promotion of the song as a unit separate from the film, song and dance as inseparable from film became “a thing of the past” in Hindi films.⁵⁸ New wave films to some extent challenged the mode in which song sequences are introduced, increasingly relegating them to the background rather than positing them as interruptions or breaks in the narrative. But this does not mean that the dominant mode in which these sequences are generally introduced disappeared entirely. Rather they evolved to exist in a multi-mediascape. The cinematic iteration of song through dance, voice, on/off screen is part of the production of a symbolic narrative and even its absence remains a glaring exception that only reiterates the role of song in Hindi films. While it could be said that increasingly songs were relegated to the background or had a realistic presence within the film such as at a wedding, and were increasingly less dependent on the interruptive song-video combination in the film, it would be remiss to suggest that they in any sense became anachronic to people’s experience of contemporary cinema. Rather, their reach only expanded with new technologies of distribution.

Today, songs have an independent existence, outside the film—such as globally, or on radio, or television, or social life, or roads, weddings, all sorts of scenes that revive nostalgia and sometimes become ritualistically tied to events. For example, some songs relating to the wedding itself, or in particular, the departure of the bride from her parental home after the wedding became ubiquitous in every wedding. Thus, the film song also has a life of its own which often exceeds the film’s narrative and popularity; the song’s success assures how it lives on in public memory in terms of both sound and image, sometimes, its image evoking sound and the sound

⁵⁸ Tejaswini Ganti, ‘No Longer a Frivolous Singing and Dancing Nation of Movie-Makers: The Hindi Film Industry and Its Quest for Global Distinction’, *Visual Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (July 2012): 340–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08949468.2012.688473>.

evoking image. The autonomy of the song operates in what Peter Manuel terms the “aural public space.”⁵⁹ Song in our everyday spaces travels in different ways, becomes sometimes part of a marching band, sometimes the auto, a noisy stranger on a train or sometimes a performance, a concert. Further, streaming platforms such as YouTube have radically changed the consumption of music. Today, music, including the video can be downloaded, passed on, viewed on the small screen of the smartphone, the infinite repertoire of music available at any time and place. This is a significant fact because those who used YouTube to listen to a song also watched the video of the scene. The other significant development was that YouTube also created independent successful artists, with streaming platforms becoming a site for people to post their own renditions and compositions. To understand the culture of musical production and reproduction, its form and its relation to cinema, it is important to remember that song is cultural, not with reference to an external history, but the history of its form, its own inner mutations and evolution. In Chapter 4, we will consider the relation of music and image and its consequences for the representations of the female body.

Conclusion

Hindi Film songs have been a syncretic mix of a variety of musical styles and genres and therefore impossible to pin down or confine into one format. Their range is not conducive to classifications of genre or periodisation. Any attempt to fix Hindi music and characterise it on the basis of a historical or formal category inevitably fall

⁵⁹ Manuel, *Cassette Culture*, 31.

short of their ambition due to the fluid, variegated and anachronic character of Hindi film music.

To go back and retrace our steps historically, the mixed nature of the Hindi film song is a result of the adaptation, appropriation and reinvention of musical genres and forms over several decades. With the motion picture industry and the coming of sound in particular more and more artists from other regions gravitated towards the film industries in Lahore and Bombay. As a result, the early period of Hindi film music is characterised by reliance on *ragas*, a system of musical arrangement common to classical music; *thumris*, *bhajans* and *folk* music were also included in the film. The earliest films were often heavily versified, some of the songs being no more than couplets. Hindi film music, like Hindi films, was influenced by various musical practices such as folk traditions, the IPTA legacy, pop, jazz and blues.⁶⁰ The xylophone, for example, was introduced by Goan musicians who were also quite active in the Jazz and Blues scene. Urdu tradition has also been a very important influence on Hindi films, *ghazals*, *nazm* and *qawwalis* are frequently heard in the music of the early cinematic period. *Filmi git* has been defined as a hybrid musical form with a wide, rather confusing range of influences and confluences.⁶¹ Any definition of the *filmi git* begins with noting the difficulties of trying to identify and classify musical forms of Hindi film songs.

⁶⁰ Booth, *Behind the Curtain*; Allison Arnold, 'Hindi Film Git: On the History of Commercial Indian Popular Music'; Anna Morcom, *Hindi Film Songs and The Cinema*; Naresh Fernandes, *Taj Mahal Foxtrot: The Story of Bombay's Jazz Age*, Har/Com edition (Lustre, 2017).

⁶¹ *Filmi git* is a translation of the term 'film song' in Hindi, it is used by Allison Arnold to define particular characteristics of Hindi film music. Her work is interested in the production process i.e., the role of singers, music directors rather than its visual or the musical aspects

Further, as hinted above, songs are influenced not so much by external economic histories as histories of their own creation, production and accessibility. It is often the case that “music directors incorporated more than one approach to composing film songs, and so there were no clear breaks between the ends of the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s.”⁶² Often the binary of classical-western is used to define these influences, the evidence for this is sought in the use of instruments or lyrics. This new and modern song style soon became a pan-Indian craze, as “audiences responded with ecstasy to the eclectic styles and the large ensembles full of Western instruments.”⁶³

To summarize, the history of film song is often divided by categorising songs as the classical golden age vs post-60s western influenced music. After the 70s, the rise of mass marketing brought in increased influence from the global music industry and electric instruments like “electric guitar, bass, and synthesizer” made an appearance on the soundtrack but even in early cinema, instruments such as drums and trumpets were part of the music. This contradicts the neat division between the western and the classical in Hindi film music. By the 60s, rock had begun to flood the Indian market and was a huge influence on film music of the period. Other easily discernible forms are “borrowed styles...jazz styles, Latin-American dances, rock-and-roll (specifically, Elvis Presley and the Beatles), Hawaiian “hapa-haole” songs, western classical, cabaret, and disco.”⁶⁴ This hybridity is often considered a bridge between “the urban and traditional” by combining western rhythms with classical Indian music. It is regulated by traditional structures but also uses western instruments. The dichotomy of the western and indigenous cannot be mapped upon the categories of western/classical rhythms as they both exist as part of music industry

⁶² Rajiv Vijayakar, 102.

⁶³ Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 157.

⁶⁴ Skillman, ‘The Bombay Hindi Film Song Genre’.

whose circulation and iconic potential exceeds such definition and categories.

Technological change played a large role in reorganising the landscape of music and audience. It would be in a sense contradictory to define the hybridity of music with reference to it as if they were composed of two separate categories. Hybridity begets something new and cannot be analysed through its division into prior categories.

Furthermore, they are historically incorrect, becoming misnomers given the hybrid nature of film music. Any such analysis neglects the intertwined history of forms such as jazz, rock and blues and the role of orchestras and so-called ‘western’ influence in early cinema and its continuance across decades. Lastly, the division of music into categories bound to geography and time assume a synchronicity of values between musical form and these divisions, the popularity of music goes beyond generations, and could not be said to fully represent values of a generation as though it was bound to a set of values except for those often nostalgically imagined.

Section II: Understanding the Place of Music: Film, Narrative and Song

Within films, the contribution of music to narrative varies in relation to the scene, character or narrative. It can have both realist and non-realist functions—contextualising time, place and setting; creating a certain mood or ambience; providing clues of plot and narrative, it could foretell or retrospectively define particular sequences and character motivations, emotions, inclinations or attitudes; it brings meaning and emotional depth to the image and calls upon the audience emotions to engross themselves in the plot, characters or narrative of the film.⁶⁵ Song and music could also be “sites for flashback, memory and spatial and temporal

⁶⁵ Kalinak, *Film Music*; Natalie Sarrazin, ‘Celluloid Love Songs: Musical “Modus Operandi” and the Dramatic Aesthetics of Romantic Hindi Film’, *Popular Music* 27, no. 3 (2008): 393–411, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40212399>.

disjunctions” and can subvert narrative by “repositioning the viewer’s understanding of the temporal flow and trajectories of the storyline and its possible outcomes.”⁶⁶

Gopalan and Gorbman present us with two opposite functions of music in the narrative; while for Gopalan, they serve as junctures for heightened discontinuity from narrative, Gorbman asserts that music “lessens spatial and temporal discontinuities with its own melodic and harmonic continuity”. It could also “free the image of strict realism.”⁶⁷ In this sense, music has a much more complex entanglement with cinematic reality than is generally assumed. It can be functional to the narrative—part of story progression, or it could play a displacing role in space and time as an interruption. It also functions “as a “suturing” device, unifying disparate and disconnected images and impart(ing) a rhythm to their unfolding.”⁶⁸ Song draws us further into the fantasy of the image. But they are not mere carriers of the meaning of the image. The visual and the aural inform and construct each other. Music is then part of the narrative universe of cinema. It makes meaning. Barthes concept of *ancrage* or anchorage could be one way of thinking about film music or rather song-dance and narrative and discuss how they become meaningful in relation to each

⁶⁶ Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*, 129; Sarrazin, ‘Celluloid Love Songs: Musical “Modus Operandi” and the Dramatic Aesthetics of Romantic Hindi Film’, 210.

⁶⁷ Claudia Gorbman, ‘Narrative Film Music’, *Yale French Studies*, n.d., 22.

⁶⁸ See Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film*, 44–45. According to Gorbman, this act of suturing masks ‘the technological nature of film discourse’. In this sense, she isolates cinematic technology as an ontological concept, one that can be defined and characterised in its essence, its ‘nature’; this is bound with the effacement of the technological nature of our everyday lives and realities. Cinema brings order to disconnected images, a sight that is already part of our everyday and gives them meaning just as we often assign meaning and narratives to our lives. Further, the technological dependence of art is not an exclusive quality of cinema, but one shared partly by all contemporary art, all of which is part of or enabled by industry which provides the material, and often itself conceals its reliance on technology. Cinema enables a certain definitiveness and meaning to imagery that is not possible in our everyday lives, fictionalising or reimagining narratives in images that are otherwise unrealisable, yet this is no longer contained within cinema, contemporary art employs imagery and technology in ways that blur the meanings of cinema, and its distinction as a technological art.

other.⁶⁹ There is a mutual dependence of meaning on which the image and sound rely. Placed at the intersection of musical and cinematic practices, film music, in this instance particularly, the film song, is always in conversation with the narrative—either as a break from or as an integral, crucial element.

We have already referred to Madhav Prasad's notion of hybridity of production in Hindi film wherein each labour component individually imagines and executes the shot/ scene or takes over a task in the process of filmmaking. Choreographers, lyricists, singers, dance cinematographers, stars each bring their own to the narrative of the film. In this sense it is imprinted with disparate senses of art, life and even worldviews, accommodating different forms and contradictions within a largely formulaic film. According to Prasad's argument, despite the "endless supply of catchy tunes", the variations and range of Hindi film songs draw not on demands of the narrative, but rather are governed by their own internal tradition and the artisans have "control over their own means of production, to supply these songs." However, his work presupposes an independence of song from the narrative, positing their existence in their own structure, separate from the variations of the narrative, consistent in their inherited and "set repertoire of images and tropes."⁷⁰ This argues for the extrication of song from its dependence upon narrative coherence, disregarding the interactions between narrative and song as experienced by the audience and as used within the text to generate meaning. But Prasad's work confuses production with form. While it is true that musicians often came to realise the songs from within their own tradition, in terms of film form, one can also consider how they constituted a

⁶⁹ Barthes introduces the concept to discuss how the photograph and caption inform each other's meaning in the production of a news item. Through the text, the reader is guided towards certain readings excluding others. Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', in *Visual Culture: The Reader*, ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London: SAGE Publications, 1999), 38.

⁷⁰ Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film*, 44–45.

narrative through their juxtaposition. Within the film form, even if the audience remembers the song and not the story, the introduction of song and the relationship established between this interruptive narrative device and the narration of the story have an impact on its picturisation, and on its memorability. A study of song and dance needs to be cognizant not only of the life of song outside of the film, but also try and understand its relationship to film as well as its relationship to itself. Songs, as we argued earlier, feature in more complex ways than just as an interruption; in the Hindi film, song is or can be crucial to plot or narrative development, and if nothing else, it sets the mood and introduces us to the emotional core of the narrative. In many ways songs are also their own narratives, within the film they form a comprehensive whole that communicates a story or simple expressivity to the audience. The relationship of song and narrative then is far more complex.

Music is part of a multi-mediascape to understand which, we need to think about the impact that comes as a result of bringing together the moving image with a soundtrack and the filmic narrative.⁷¹ Further, the meanings generated by the text do not exist in isolation, they adhere to other cultural and cinematic musical codes and follow certain conventions that make its meaning legible. This requires a more grounded analysis of film sound based on “close analyses of particular films rather than on ontological speculations that presume to cover all possible practices.”⁷² For instance, the progression of narrative—how it fades to introduce songs, how it evolves, at what point can song and narrative be separated, what visual and dramatic cues does it employ, and how do they affect the narrative? According to this view, generalised theoretical assumptions about cinema as a study of song and narrative

⁷¹ Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁷² Rick Altman, ‘Four and a Half Film Fallacies’, in *Sound Theory/Sound Practice*, ed. Robert B. Altman (London: New York: Routledge, 1992), 37.

needs to pay careful attention to individual films, or even patterns within cinema. However, when seen from the broader and more important perspective of what constitutes knowledge or understanding of cinema as a cultural form, exclusive preoccupation with individual films falls short of that objective, unless the selected individual films have some paradigmatic status and can help us understand the wider landscape. But the very identification of such films is nearly an impossible task since, as we stated above, cinema as a field is not amenable to classifications based on genre, form or any other aspect.

Introduction

Song-dance is a conjoined term that is often evoked when one discusses the Hindi film song, or even the Hindi film in general. Of course, song and dance are often conjoined, in terms of the way they are placed in the film. But this phrase places song or rather music, lyrics, the entire vocabulary of the Hindi film song at the service of the image, treating them as subservient to it. Gregg Redner reinforces this point when he says, “because film music responds to extra-musical visual stimulation any methodology which dismisses the philosophical discussion of meaning or the musical interaction between mise-en-scene, narrative and score is bound to be inefficient.”⁷³ Song picturisation in this sense, is not merely the juxtaposition of a certain sound at a certain moment (or movement), or a certain word touching upon the actor’s expression. Music and dance are woven into the very fabric of the cinematic apparatus.

There is no dispute that song and narrative have a complex relationship. The combination of audio-visual codes: the montage, dance, lyrics, rhythm, voice which

⁷³ Gregg Redner, *Deleuze and Film Music: Building a Methodological Bridge Between Film Theory and Music* (Intellect Books, 2011), 19.

interact with the film and each other make it a multi-layered narrative component. As a “combinatoire of expression” Hindi film songs’ cinematic representation is dynamic and reciprocal, with the image and sound sharing “mutual implications.”⁷⁴ Treating the elements within the song as discrete objects of study provides us only a partial understanding of song. The interpretations presented and defended here enable us to approach Hindi film songs as independent or dependent units of film, as plot devices that may or may not have a role to play in the plot development or story-building and as cultural presence independent of the film. Understanding the role of song as a “narrative agent” one could more closely analyse the relationship between sound, image and narrative.⁷⁵ These concepts expand our understanding of the diverse relationships between song and narrative. the film’s internal universe, how song and narrative intersect in the film, the position of song or its role in the narrative and the diegetic world of film They also guide us towards a reimagining of the song as a ‘micronarrative’—a narrative universe distinct in its emotional, visual and aural content even as it is bound to the film narrative in many ways. Throughout the thesis, the author asserts that songs be understood not only as units within the film, contributing to or deviating from the narrative order of the film, but as a form of narrative complete in itself. Micronarrative thus can be defined as a unit within the narrative which holds a storyworld, characterisation and environ of its own—making it possible for it to be enjoyed individually without reference to the film, or for that matter, to any background.

⁷⁴ Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (London; Bloomington: BFI Pub.; Indiana University Press, 1987), 189, <http://books.google.com/books?id=PK-fAAAAMAAJ>.

⁷⁵ Kalinak, *Film Music*, 30–31.

Song as Para-narrative

According to Vasudevan, the melodramatic form is non-linear. Hindi film of the 1950s works as a “double articulation.” This “double articulation” includes the “pleasure of the ending” which signifies narrative closure as well as the “pleasures of transgression.”⁷⁶ The denouement resolves moral anxiety and transgressive texts such as song/dance and comedy are spectacles or attractions exceeding textual presence and meaning.⁷⁷ He describes songs, dances and comic sequences as “para-narrative units” while distinguishing between the narrational song i.e., a song that is integrated into the narrative and plot development, and the “para-narrative” song-dance, one that is seemingly lacking a frame of reference to the narrative but erupts against the narrative command of the text articulating that which cannot be said in the text.⁷⁸ The para-narrative carries the defiant charge of female desire against the grain of narrative to return the woman to her patriarchal boundaries. As we will see below, due to the range of functions played by song in the narrative, this binary between narrational and para-narrative as well as the notion of female desire have limited and partial application to the narrative universe of film.

Song as Production Number

Similar to Vasudevan’s distinction between the narrational and the parallel text is Usha Iyer’s work on song-narrative relationship. Song can be either an integral, expressive number that moves the story forward or a site for spectatorial pleasure disconnected from the plot. Her distinction defines the narrative numbers as songs

⁷⁶ Ravi Vasudevan, ‘the melodramatic mode and the commercial Hindi cinema’. 1989., 22.

⁷⁷ Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public*. As defined by Vasudevan, Hindi film centres on a domestic drama which involves obstacles and the final overthrow of the father’s rule by the son. The father is a symbolic representation and the denouement of the film and the triumph of the hero often brings the audience cathartic relief.

⁷⁸ Vasudevan, ‘the melodramatic mode and the commercial Hindi cinema’, 31.

that are integrated with the narrative or story in terms of space, performance and emotion. Often these are personal emotions with undulating choreography softened to fit the considerations of the narrative. The production number is structured to display dancing bodies. The sequence can be experiential and overtly choreographed and have an emotional valence in excess of what is permitted by the storyline.

These views raise the question of narrative intent and song. In both instances, song is primarily divided as being extraneous to the narrative: as para-narrative or production number as opposed to an integrated narrational song. The term “production number” is echoed by Gorbman to define songs which are primarily devoted to musical performance rather than subordinate to the demands of the narrative.⁷⁹ The distinction of song’s presence in the film text as a diversion from the narrative and integration into the narrative are useful signposts that initiate the discussion on the interaction and variety of functions of song to the narrative. Despite this, these categories limit the many permutations of cinematic song and narrative when seen against the backdrop of the complex sign-system of the aural-visual sequence. The also further increases the risk of partial meaning when it is studied in terms of individual components.

Defining Narrative

In the simplest sense of the term, a narrative is a story with a beginning, middle and end, wherein two or more events are narrated with a causal or temporal relation between them. Film narratives are generally seen as an extension of literary

⁷⁹ Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 2.

narratives, with visual representation.⁸⁰ According to Bordwell, film narrative has three dimensions. They are:

the storyworld: its agents, circumstances, and surroundings; plot structure, the arrangement of the parts of the narrative as we have it; and narration, the moment-by-moment flow of information about the story world.

In the case of Hindi film, the dominant narrative strategy is the interspersed spectacle of musical, action and comic elements. These elements can be diversions from the narrative or can be used to heighten the affect and mood of the sequence.

The song sequence has a prominent place in narration and can be said to be part of each dimension either as a ‘narrative form’ i.e., telling a story through the sequence, or as a narrative device, constituting a reciprocity that informs the narrative and is itself informed by it. In the case of the former, one could consider songs as independent units, akin to the definition of the production number; nevertheless, the complexity comes into view when we look at specific films. It is here that we can see that there are many other contributions of the song to the film narrative that cannot be subsumed by the division of narrational and non-narrational. Further, as Gorbman notes “in Hindi film songs, there is an imaginative, affective foregrounding of space, sound, movement, star within the song sequences that reaches far beyond narrative coherence.”⁸¹ Hindi film song is both dependent on the narrative for its meaning, but is also enjoyed as an independent source of entertainment. One can also think of the Hindi film song as a micro-narrative that within the macro-narrative of film, sets its own codes of sound and vision.

⁸⁰ David Bordwell, ‘The Musical Analogy’, *Yale French Studies*, n.d., 17.

⁸¹ Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 166.

The study of the Hindi film song in relation to narrative is only a partial effort, a more nuanced analysis of the song with relation not only to narrative, but to its own individual elements is necessary. In this spirit, the work has forwarded the concept of the micro-narrative, which is the integration of sound and image as a cohesive whole which forms its own narrative universe within the film. We could briefly list some of the functions and techniques of incorporating or diverting song and narration. These categories are not clearcut, and often overlap with each other.

The first relationship, indicated above, is that of song as a parallel to the narrative—following its own teleological trajectory and offering a story line that contrasts from the narrative. The term para-narrative implies that song is also a narrative running parallel to the actual narrative of the film. But this is not true. A song is neither a parallel narrative nor a counter narrative. When the song constitutes a narrative, it is usually a closed narrative without any link to the main narrative. This notion appears to be based on a careless understanding of what constitutes a narrative. Closely followed by this is what Vasudevan terms the narrational song. In this case, the song is often synchronous with the events in the film or is used to further the narrative. In this case, a song as a distinct element loses its force. If prose/speech dialogue is replaced by lyric/song, it is a minor difference. Outside of these two relationships is that of song as “production number”. In this case, song is an extraneous item—as a pre-packaged text that is often inserted into the film in order to bolster the popularity of the film, and is often presented and enjoyed independent of the film. As previously discussed, songs, when they perform this function, bring emotional depth to the narrative. They can also act as relief from an otherwise stark narrative: as pause, or also as something that illuminates another matter. Eisenstein notes two primary relationships between sound and image—synchronous and

asynchronous. In its synchronous form, sounds bring realism to the image, while in its contrapuntal role, they counter the meaning of the image. Song in the Hindi film functions like punctuation or italics—it could pause the narrative, complete it, intensify a part of it, or offer a commentary like chorus in classical Greek drama. Sometimes, as a narrative device, song moves the story forward telling the audience what it already knows or something they find out in the course of the song, or as setting for a narrative event: sounds are not descriptive, but become imbued with meaning in the course of the montage, through the music that is set against the visual image: when it is an ironic take, or when music illuminates the visual, integrated in narrative. In certain cases, song can play a thematic role, a constant refrain that keeps reminding the viewer as to the implicit or oblique aspects of the theme of the film. Several of these forms of narration can also be considered as micro-narratives i.e., they hold up viewer enjoyment without context. In this sense, even songs integrated to the narrative can often become enjoyable commodities in their own right and are thus capable of being treated as such.

Music and Image

Related but distinct from the relationship between song and narrative is the relationship between music and image. While the narrative is the storyline and is composed of the various plots or devices used to animate the story, the image adds meaning to the sounds. According to Eisenstein, the *mise-en-scene* “draws the music into a dialogue with the film’s rhythmic visual, kinetic and graphic elements”⁸² Many of the remarks on ‘song picturisation’, a term that has come to be used to refer to the

⁸² Sergei HG Eisenstein, *Film Essays and a Lecture*: (Princeton University Press, 1982), 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400853922>.

relationship between the image and song, treats the two as separate texts, or even when used singularly, often privileges sound.

As Adorno indicates,

positing that music either parallels or counterpoints what is already “there” assumes that the image is autonomous and encodes meaning unproblematically. Even today some film music criticism continues to employ terminology that assumes the image is the bearer of meaning and that music functions to modify that meaning in some way, heightening, reinforcing, or undercutting what is “in” the image.⁸³

Thus, the question of how the two relate or respond to each other, how they contribute to the affective, narrative universe of the film is rarely opened to debate. Rather they are often hierarchised with the image being considered the primary source of meaning of which music is a *supplement*. There is a need to deconstruct this hierarchy. However, that task is beyond the scope of this work.

Neepa Majumdar notes that the use of the term song picturization to describe the production of song sequences “shows a certain tendency toward defining the image in the terms set out by the song.”⁸⁴ According to such an analysis, it is the visuality of the scene and the narrative structure of the film that shape the popularity of songs. Often, songs are considered to be promotion of the star performance—whether it is the singer, actor/dancer or the music director. The term ‘song picturization’ refers to the fact that songs are recorded first and then picturized, suggesting the primacy of the song, which sets the agenda for the visuals. But the matter is not that simple. Except in cases where an already well-known song is taken, the lyrics are written, the tune decided and the singer selected, keeping the narrative, tenor, mood, characters and other aspects of the film including the casting.

⁸³ Eisler, Hanns, and Theodor W. Adorno. 1994. *Composing for the films*. London: Athlone Press.

⁸⁴ Majumdar, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s*, 180.

Usha Iyer, recognising this point, offers an inversion of the sound-oriented universe of song studies with a star-dance proposition. Her explorations on gender, film and song are oriented towards choreography of songs and the actors who perform them. Taking the example of Vyjantimala, she indicates that in her case, it was often her dancing prowess that was the primary draw of the song. The songs were moulded to demonstrate her movements in the most exciting possible ways. Further, she also suggests that song movements were revealing of the star-texts that performed them.⁸⁵ This, however, is not altogether accurate, particularly with the example of Vyjantimala, since during her time, the only way one could watch the dance was by going to watch the movie. But the dance songs were highly popular and were disseminated through radio and later through audio-cassettes. Therefore, it is deeply problematic to say that her dancing prowess is what made the songs' sustained popularity.

Even the claim that the dances offered us insights into the social relations of power/privilege and hierarchy as they were drawn over the body of female actors, rather than characters is incomplete. It is not possible to demonstrate this claim using the examples of particular dances, whether classical or improvised. The concept of "choreo-musicology" may facilitate possible new readings of the on-screen and off-screen interactions of the dancing body. But there remains a need to capture the transactions between sound and the dancing body on screen.

Song not only evokes memory but actively constructs it, making memories through associations and certain performative evocations. As Cook describes it, this is a reciprocal relationship.⁸⁶ The music and the image work in conjunction with one

⁸⁵ Iyer, 'Film Dance, Female Stardom, and the Production of Gender in Popular Hindi Cinema'.

⁸⁶ Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia*.

another, intensifying the emotional, affective and imaginative experience of cinema. In his discussion on *Sholay*, Jones' work raises the possibility of thinking about new music and new visual language emerging together—changing musical technology generating new cinematic experiences such as the technology of stereo sound that changed the auditory experience of film.⁸⁷ However, *Sholay* was one of the few 70mm films ever made in Hindi and the screening of that version was possible only in very few places. Therefore, it would be hazardous to draw too many conclusions on the basis of this film. Also, the film *Sholay* was not particularly known for its music or its cinematography. It was a highly successful film but the reasons for its success lie elsewhere.

In the context of the American film musical, Rick Altman highlights the genre's ability to reverse what he calls the "normal" image-sound hierarchy of classical Hollywood cinema, arguing that in the musical number, sound generates the movement within the image and the image becomes subordinate to sound as tempo and melody lead the dancers' movements as well as the editing decisions. While his approach seems to privilege sound of the song, it also integrates its various components and pays attention to the nature of the relationship between image, sound and narrative, not as separate, discrete units of text but as a hybrid and symbiotic form. In our work on the 'musical body', we will return to this concept to understand the linkages between music and image.

In conclusion, we need to reconsider the debate on diegetic/ extra-diegetic place of song and try to understand not only how they are positioned inside/outside the narrative but also how the visual and aural codes interact to produce an affective experience. The main task is to challenge this notion of song and dance as 'extra

⁸⁷ Beaster-Jones, *Bollywood Sounds*, 2014.

diegetic', as an appendage without meaning, a moment without coherence, as something outside of the film narrative, while also giving it its due as an immersive unit. As we will see in the sections below, songs are crucial to the sense-experience of Hindi film. Together the visual and aural create an emotional depth in the narrative, one which is only partially understood through a disarticulation of the image and the sound and the privileging of the image or the music as the primary bearer of meaning.

The Song's Affective Charge

It would be platitudinous but correct to say that the experience of cinema relies largely on the production of sensation and emotion through the juxtaposition of sound, image and space. Within this sensorium, songs often articulate emotional climax through their techniques of expression. Song pulls the audience further into the film, confirming their presence with the screen, and bringing a voice to the image. Their fantastical presentation often breaks from spatial continuity, heightens emotion and enables immersion into the cinematic universe. It is, as has been dubbed, a "bath of affect" combining aurality and viscosity taking us further into the fantasy-illusion of cinema. The affective charge of songs reverberates through the audience through a play with the various senses informing how they watch the film. How the viewers grasp the encounter between themselves and the screen is regulated through a series of representational strategies.

Songs in this sense can be studied in terms of the affects and sensations they arouse rather than their visual aspects alone. Affect is to be understood as ephemeral and inarticulable series of sensations and emotions generated by the cornucopia of sounds, images and situations in which the encounter with cinema takes place. While it is true that films are first and foremost a visual medium, the lack of attention to its sounds gives us only a partial understanding of the text. Though it is a bit of

exaggeration, Michael Chion's observation that "it is the ear that makes the image visible" is not altogether false.⁸⁸

The discipline of sound studies thus provides an apt beginning to think about the primacy of analysis of visual and narrative form in cinema through its critique of the sound-visual hierarchy.⁸⁹ This "ontological fallacy" has led to a lack of interrogation on the aurality of social cultures.⁹⁰ The focus on film as visual culture often overlooks the aspect of sound in the film and its engagement with the story, form and image of the film. The predominance of the iconicity of cinema has pushed the study of its sounds into the background with little focus on how sounds encode meaning within film.

Considerations of reciprocity between image and sound first emerged in the 70s. *Audio-Vision* is often considered the seminal work that founded this field. It remarks on the prevalence of visual analysis, instead offering the acoustic environment of the film as a "sonorous envelope" that surrounds the listener as a maternal imaginary. Chion proposes a Lacanian analysis of sound and image by suggesting the concept of the "ascousmaton"— "the sound is the first introduction of the child, even a pre-natal introduction" showing us the sensory and affective potential of sound.⁹¹ By linking it to images, he shows how sound is not merely an addition to an image, but constitutes our relationship with it.

⁸⁸ Chion, Gorbman, and Murch, *Audio-Vision*, 45. This is a rather debatable and, I dare say, dramatic statement since it assumes that the meaning of the image lies in the use of sound. Rather than debating on the primacy of one over the other, it is their entanglement that provides a space of meaningful analysis

⁸⁹ For an extensive overview on film sound, see Anaïs Le Fèvre-Berthelot, 'Audio-Visual: Disembodied Voices in Theory', *InMedia*, no. 4 (12 November 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4000/inmedia.697>.

⁹⁰ Altman, 'Four and a Half Film Fallacies', 36.

⁹¹ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, 14th edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

His concepts which founded the field of film sound have been embraced by feminist studies who think of the voice as *voix-feminin* against the symbolic order of film. Seen as a subversive articulation, the feminine voice is an “unleashing” of emotionality. Anais Le Fevre Berthelot further argues that the “voice was a territory of freedom women has to conquer.”⁹² She is referring here to silence that surrounds female desire and expression. Scholars such as Caryl Finn point out that sound and woman are inscribed outside of patriarchy.⁹³ Sound in film, and the female voice in particular, has often been described as woman’s space. They indicate the networks between the voice and the body that govern our unconscious expression, indicating the study of film sound as a feminist enterprise. Britta Sjorgen critiques such approaches to film sound as they treat the voice as ‘text’ without a physical, technological and historical spectator. Thus, these approaches miss an important component of film sound, the one who hears the voice outside the diegetic text, the audience.

This analysis is plagued by the essentialist models of the time which often drew on the binary of rational men and emotional women to unseat the primacy of patriarchal assumptions. They mark the voice as a refuge from patriarchy thereby essentialising woman and her otherness. Mary Ann Doane critiques this analysis to suggest that voice is also very much a place of “interdiction” and “patriarchal order.” According to her, voices anchor the body in space. The sustenance of film fantasy through cinematic techniques “spatialize the voice, to localize it, give it depth and thus lend to the characters the consistency of the real.”⁹⁴ It is the voice, that in one

⁹² Le Fèvre-Berthelot, ‘Audio-Visual’, para. 22.

⁹³ Cf. Gaubman, 48.

⁹⁴ Mary Ann Doane, ‘The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space’, *Yale French Studies*, no. 60 (1980): 36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930003>.

way or another make the characters believable. The voice bridges the relationship between bodies and the cinema-space, the theatre and the screen alike. The body, according to Doane is also “the site of women’s oppression” and being such a site is simultaneously a space where resistance becomes possible but which also makes this analysis of defiant sound and defiant bodies subject to the discursive structures under which this resistance is produced. Given the difficulty of producing a theoretical understanding of sound in film, our analysis needs to consider individual instances, the specific articulation of sound and bodies without giving in to the temptation of drawing broader conclusions.

According to Doane, “the political erotics of the voice” lies in the three spaces of diegesis: screen, theatre and the relationships established between the spectator and these spaces through the employment of voice and body, which offer interpretative possibilities for reading cinematic pleasure and signification. Sound interacts with space, narrative, bodies to produce the meaning of the text. As Doane concludes, there is no such thing as a feminist interpretation of voice since voice lies in this elusive enfolding of the audience and screen surrounded by the sound of the theatre.⁹⁵

Cinema’s audio-visual complex is a multi-semiotic, multi-textural, and multi-affective medium, and the components of the film text are complementary to one another. Cinema is the site of intersection and interaction between sound and image. Gorbman suggests that music “anchors the image in meaning, throws a net around the floating visual signifier.”⁹⁶ The image and sound in film are not separable components, the sound a mere supplement to the image, but produce meaning through

⁹⁵ Doane, ‘The Voice in the Cinema’.

⁹⁶ Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 58.

interaction with one another. Song often brings a harmony, a melody, a narrative to disparate images and often immerse the audience further into the cinematic pleasure and illusion rather than jolting us from the artificiality of the film. Thus, the film sustains its fantastic aura. To understand song, we need to theorise the role of music in today's multi-mediascape and the many meanings that music elicits from its listeners. Music allows the spectator to be more engaged in the film and informs his/her/ their understanding of the film's significations. It does not simply reinforce the image as a realistic sequence may make it appear but layers the scene with meaning, transforming it in the process. music being one of the more memorable components of film's visual-aural complex, the interaction between sound and image and not the components themselves i.e., the relation between voice and vision needs to be considered instead of one or the other.

Conclusion

A close look at the song sequence reveals the various mappings of sexuality that overlay a sequence. Cinema is to be treated as affective, borrowing on notions of feeling, of desire and erotica as it is evoked through the interaction of the various elements. Theoretical interpretations based on specific analysis fail to acknowledge the ever-shifting referentiality of the sign and the heterogeneity of the audience. There is an inevitable and endless slippage of the sign in film, this is further complicated by the overlaying of voice, vision and affect which are primary to our experience of film.

The song is one site where due to the intense discussion on sexuality and the female body, we can begin to think of the erotic charge of the text; it holds the key to its erotic density. The song opens up the possibilities of desire,

ensconced in the narrative, obliquely gestured rather than brazenly demonstrated. Sexuality in the song-dance sequence involves complex language such that provocative lyrics might be offset by subdued gestures and otherwise provocative gestures are reined in by the innocence of the lyrics. Song lyrics, choreography, vocals, appearance and the narrative offsetting one another and bringing to life a language of desire in terms of what is culturally available and possible. It could bring to the surface the erotic charge of seemingly innocuous song or contain the possible transgression by offering a palatable field for its expression. Consider the song “Beri ke Ber” from the film *Anokhi Raat*, highly suggestive, the song was picturised on Aruna Irani surrounded by a group of female dancers dressed in folk/tribal attire. The idyllic painted huts in the background and the props of sieves invite the audience to view the image in all its innocence. The presence of a man shaking a tree to pluck berries makes literal the otherwise suggestive lyrics: “*Meri beri ke ber mat todo*” (don’t pluck the berries of my garden), which is an obvious reference to virginity. The group performances and the sight of the audience, combined with the sounds of classical instruments like the tabla contrast the lyrical sensuality of the song against the innocuous imagery. The euphemistic pretence disappears in the remix which reinterprets the song as an erotic, sensual and highly suggestive number with a lone girl against the background of faceless clubgoers dancing and grinding to the song with her tattoos and thongs on display. This also indicates another crucial point about Hindi film music, desire has always found a way into the film, either veiled in innocence or concealed by the narrative, only to be exposed in song. The study of sexuality in song is not only a matter of control, censorship and the voice of the state speaking through the women, but a look at the articulations that became possible. This can be demonstrated in many of the remix sequences, which by bringing in a re-

articulation of the song in a new video format brought their otherwise hidden subtle hints to light. In this way, we can see that to study sexuality in the Hindi film, we can look at how the song gives us a dynamic and collaborative sequence—where picturisation can meet vocalisation of desire.

To summarize, this body of knowledge treats sound as primary to the film text critiquing the focus on the visual dimension of cinema. This work itself is based on a fallacy, since film can exist without a sound, but sound without film cannot be cinema.⁹⁷ Yet they have alerted us to take a more integrated approach to cinema that treats other sensory experiences as contributory to the world of the film. As the first work on film sound, *Audio-vision* asserts “the image is the conscious focus of attention, but one to which the sound supplies at every moment a series of effects, sensations, and meanings.”⁹⁸

The study of film in visual terms alone limits our study of the production, voice, space and various other elements of the text that are part of its meaning. Ignoring the interaction between the various elements and the multisensory experience of the song as well as the changing evolution of the form neglects their impact on the representation of women, their bodies, voices, performances and framing. In summary, cinema is not merely image, it is the integration of sensory pleasures to create an immersive experience. The field of cultural production lies

⁹⁷ Rick Altman believes that the primacy of the visual is a result of an ‘ontological fallacy’ which considered the visual as primary to the meaning and structure of the film. I argue that that cinema is after all known for its vision rather than its sound. Nevertheless, voice or rather sound has been completely ignored and its contribution to the construction of the text’s meaning has been neglected. See “Introduction: Four and a Half Film Fallacies,” in Rick Altman, ed, *Sound Theory, Sound Practice* (New York; London: Routledge, 1992), 14.

⁹⁸ <http://www.michelchion.com/v1/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=45&Itemid=60>, accessed 06/07/2013 cf. Le Fèvre-Berthelot, ‘Audio-Visual’.

between representation, reception, institution, individual creativity and conformity/cultural industry.

By arguing for the ephemeral and complex relationships that imbricate sexuality in the song sequence, this work argues that cinema and its audio-visual capacities allow for a greater range of, often contradictory, meanings, further the construction of meaning happens at the interface of audience and screen. The debate needs to interrogate the concept of nation and of historical readings which underpin visual analysis, instead looking at the affective dimensions of sexuality. It is further argued that sequences which foreground the spectacle of the female body such as cabaret and item numbers also release this emotiveness of sensuality. Song is a heightening of feeling and enthrallment of the senses these meanings emerge in combination with each other but also through the capacities of the spectator. The feelings make it appear that we are individualised, but the theatre and the collective emotion of the film are mystified in this instance, we see it as a direct relation with the screen—leaving us with a nebulous and uncapturable notion of affect which does not account for the commonality of experience. Rather than discussing them as provocative, our interest lies in thinking through how the audience and sign interact to produce notions of sensuality distributed along a heterogenous public. In conclusion then, affect does not necessarily individuate film experience rather it provides a common ground for us to think about the collective generation of emotion. The song sequence then offers us a way of thinking about the relation between body, screen and emotion, or pleasure.

Song, Dance and Sexuality: A Critique of Old and New Approaches

Introduction

The representation of women in cinema is often understood through a standard set of tropes: the nation, the gaze, respectability, star theory and the tradition/modernity dichotomy. Figures considered at the periphery of cinema have engaged the imagination of scholars debating the agential, defiant and conformist roles played by women on screen. The “bad women of cinema”—the vamps, the courtesans are considered the symbols of national anxiety over womanhood. Their erasure manifesting in death, ostracization or tragic ends has been concluded as means of taming these characters, marking the eventual restoration of order in film. These theories can be said to follow the model of culture as battlefield since theories on defiance or subjugation tend to view culture as an encounter between two oppositional forces. The study of sexuality in Hindi film has also been greatly influenced by the theory of “nationalist resolution” under which the binary of tradition and modernity are predicated. In these latter works, visuality of the song sequence remains the primary method of interpreting sexuality in the film song. This chapter seeks to critically analyse the conceptual vocabulary of sexuality relevant to song studies, and point to the need for close analysis of the manner in which emotions are generated rather than the sensibilities of star, nation and others. It requires our broadening of oppositions to accommodate constructions that are never quite in the realm of defiance or conformity in a mutually exclusive way.

Section I: Gender and Nation

This section expands on the conception that a relation between gender and nation which has become endemic to the discourse of Hindi cinema as national cinema, and the subsequent argument that the representation of women in cinema is a product of nationalist consensus.¹

It must be asked, why is this moment considered so central to understanding representation of women or sexuality. It is not clear why work on gender and cinema should prioritize the colonial encounter even though, as far as the history of film is concerned, there are parallel and sometimes opposite ways in which the gender discourse has operated in cinema. There is nothing that counts as evidence to show that films are somehow direct or even indirect *products* of national or state processes. While it may be true that certain films draw on these constructs, this has to be approached in the context of film as art form rather than rest on a precarious claim on its relation to a grand narrative of history. Given that films do not *reflect* history or society but use them as material for their own artistic exploration, questions of gender must remain wary of problematic claims about biographical or historical relations and representation, traced to the grand imaginary called the nation. The trouble with the concept of nation as used in these contexts is that it contains very little on the nature of our social life. Our lives are informed not only by the state, but also by forces external to the state—the state itself acts as no more than a conduit for these forces and cannot be treated as a definitive medium for our interpretations of tradition and

¹ Kumkum Sangari, *Recasting Women Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2003); Janaki Nair and Mary E. John, eds., *A Question of Silence: The Sexual Economies of Modern India* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2000); Jyotika Virdi, *The Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular Films as Social History*; Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987*; Ranjani Mazumdar, 'Desiring Women', in *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Majumdar, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s*.

modernity. Those concepts are better defined through an understanding of social transformations that are reflected in the visual and the musical styles of a period. There is a particular propensity for justifying art by context, whereby historical context is often derived from grasping the more evident and large-scale historical processes. One could suggest that the social context becomes a setting from within which the creative impulses of the theme are teased out. The establishing of a necessary and pervasive relationship between film and the nation-state compromises the dispersion of influence, adaptation and creative freedom for theoretical linearity. As we have discussed in the first chapter, the notion that within capitalism creative freedom is a slave to the processes of production is a pessimistic thought that undermines the interplay of various forces and counter-forces in the making of popular culture. Such a theory tends to retrieve post-colonial models of the cinema-state relationship at the cost of understanding the complex of transactional relationships, and the relation of cinema and the emotional pull of images as a complex phenomenon informed by other social forces that are in excess of the nation and belong rather in the domain of individual emotion.

Introduction: Woman and Nation

Scholarship on the subject of cinema and gender has often drawn links between the female body and the nation. The primary and perhaps the most important instance is resolution theory, a concept borrowed from Partha Chatterjee's seminal essay *National Resolution of the Woman's Question* which discusses the construction of ideal middle-class womanhood in the context of the nationalist movement, particularly in Bengal.

According to Chatterjee:

Nationalism did in fact provide an answer to the new social and cultural problems concerning the position of women in “modern” society, and that this was an answer not posited on identity but on a difference with the perceived forms of modernity in the west.²

This concept has been a consistent companion for an understanding of female representation in public sphere as well as in popular culture. It coalesces around the dominant construction of middle-class Bengali women in the literature of the nationalist movement. According to Chatterjee, the construction of difference was constitutive of the imagined spiritual superiority of the Indian nation against the decadent materialism of the west. The new modern woman “was contrasted” by both “western society” and “indigenous tradition.”³ Her modesty, her role in public life and at home became matters of open debate.⁴ The argument can be summarised as follows: Hindi cinema stages the nationalist conflict around modernity and tradition embodied by the roles of women, and their place in the narrative. Films reveal the apprehension over female sexuality and the implications of modernity on women. Though much has changed recently and more complex modes of studying sexuality in Hindi film have evolved, the concept of ‘nation’ still hangs heavily in many analyses of cinema. It has been argued that in the process of refashioning Indian selfhood post-independence, the nationalists established a paradigm for modern womanhood. This divide was a result of colonial tension between oppressive practices of Indian tradition and the ‘modern’, if immoral, behaviour of the colonisers. Thus, modernity for

² Chatterjee, ‘The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question (1989)’, 117.

³ Chatterjee, ‘The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question (1989)’.

⁴ The new woman was also contrasted with the ‘common’ woman, according to Chatterjee. If the new woman is given to etiquette, the common woman was vulgar and loud, entirely without manners.

women was premised on a compromise, between preservation of the spiritual values of Indian tradition and revolt against practices that held back women's progress and contribution to the economy.

According to this theory, the nationalists were also opposed to the barbaric treatment of women, thus exposing the oppression of women built into cultural practices such as *sati* and child marriage. The reformists criticised several practices as misogynistic and outdated and replaced them with a self-fashioned idea of modernity and its culture, distinct from the colonial narrative while still retaining its largely Hindu hegemony. The conception of spiritual superiority played a large role in consolidating the ideological formations that followed. The crisis of this newly fashioned identity, which was forced to abandon old beliefs and was in danger of being colonised was resolved through the bifurcation of the material and spiritual domains i.e., the *bahir* (outside world) and *andhar* (home). This dichotomy played a large role in structuring public spaces as well as representations of womanhood. According to Chatterjee, this tussle which was enacted in the context of Bengal, came to be defined as nationalist ethos. Its implications were that the female body was subject to cultural anxiety that tied her public behaviour and appearance to her moral character. This new code permitted certain changes as part of modern development and cultural progress, while discarding aspects of this shift which threatened the dominant culture and its ethos.

This theory has been embraced in the study of gender and cinema, in attempts to explain a range of things, from the notion of respectability in early cinema to later cinematic developments, particularly prior to liberalisation at which point various forces contributed to the rise of globalisation, to the demands of the market and changing cultural codes transformed the industry. The theory, based out of analysis in

Bengal, has been promulgated as a theory applicable to the national aspirations of cinema. Such hasty induction is bound to undermine the varied influences of socio-cultural import, both local and global that had an impact on the ideologies that underlie cinematic images and the production of sexuality. They also tend to ignore the varied responses by nationalists across the country, treating the Bengali nationalists as representative of the ideologies of nationalism.

There are several other problems with this theory that need attention. First of all, as pointed out above, the content of the referent 'nation' in this theory is far from clear. We tend to use the terms 'nation' and 'national' carelessly in common parlance, for instance, when we say that cricket is our national obsession. But in contexts of serious discussions of significant import, we have to be careful as to how we define these terms. There are countries that are monolingual, monocultural and mono-religious. In the case of those countries, nation, land, language and culture are coterminous. Therefore, it is not problematic to speak of national language, national culture and so on. But in the case of a country like India, which is multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-linguistic and multi-cultural, the idea of 'nation' has to be delineated in a different and more calibrated manner. To declare any one language, culture, or cinema as 'national', even if pan-Indian—which they are not unless we blithely ignore large parts of the country—is a huge leap, and a dangerous leap at that. In fact, this very attempt is a very good example of the hegemonic use of the term 'nation'.

The same entity can be different things depending upon its function, features and significance. In some contexts, it is unexceptionable to use the terms 'nation' and 'country' interchangeably. In some other contexts such as when we contrast a state within the country with the country itself, the term 'national', for instance when we say refer to state highways as opposed to national highways, it is not inappropriate.

Strictly speaking, a nation is recognized by its sovereignty, and some ideals and principles that mark that sovereignty. The Indian nation is the expression of the Indian constitution, and secondarily it is characterised and defined by certain principles and practices that are designated as national through specific procedures. Therefore, the use of the term ‘national’ in expressions such as ‘national resolution of women’s question’ is misleading.

The second point is with regard to the term ‘nationalist’. The theory appears to claim that there was a resolution by the nationalists. But who were these nationalists? The term ‘nationalist’ applies to all those who agreed that India should be freed from British rule, and those who actively or passively participated in the efforts and struggles to achieve that freedom. There is no evidence that there was any resolution as part of the nationalist agenda of achieving independence from British rule. If it is meant that the nationalists thought that there was women’s issue in the context of future independent nation, there is no evidence for that either. If some people regarded it as an issue and offered resolutions for it, they were naively ahistorical. Their views and their suggestions were based on a confused conflation of westernisation, modernisation and the exigencies arising from increasing occasions for women to occupy public space, largely due to non-domestic employment opportunities opened up by changing socio-economic and technological conditions.

Tradition and Modernity

Tradition versus modernity is the primary binary of the resolution theory. In this conception, tradition is regarded as part of the spiritual domain that must be protected, while modernity involves the adoption of what are considered modes of ‘westernisation’. Chatterjee suggests that the new woman is precisely the point at which these opposite strands meet. Some scattered, regional (and hardly influential)

literature of the period may have exhorted women to retain the spiritual values that define their community, while also participating in modern economic and social life. This may have involved a comparison of the Indian woman with the *memsahib*, a vague category indicating imitation of British ways of life, modern outlook, independence of thought and action, bundled together in a confused way. The latter was projected as wanton, vain and unscrupulous, and generally depraved. The aim of this effort was to persuade the “New Indian Woman” was to embrace modernity without giving up the spiritual domain of the home.

According to this argument, the question of women’s place and participation in modern life had been settled through the discourse around the ‘modern Indian woman’ who was distinguished from the ‘traditional’ woman but also the women of the west. In nationalist discourse, tradition even as it is elevated as ideal is contested as an oppressive force that subjugates and deprivileges women. On the other hand, the values of the ‘west’ were considered degenerate and undesirable for women. While the colonisers were seen as puerile and immoral, tradition weighed as an oppressive, brutal force over Indian women. The ‘modern’ Indian woman was both fiercely independent and domesticated. She embodied tradition in her conduct and questioned traditional feminine roles with her public presence. As Chatterjee points out, the literature of the period went to great lengths to define the modern *bhadramahila*. The tension between respectability, honour and public presence was played out on the female body. But this brings up one important question which Chatterjee has also obliquely raised: what is the basis for assuming an innate relation between the domestic and the spiritual? And spiritual in precisely what sense? If spiritual is just a euphemism for moral, how is it possible to even remotely juxtapose the exigencies of the public space with the obligations of the domestic space?

It is true that it was a period of considerable socio-political and economic upheaval; a time of social change, the like of which was not seen in centuries. As to be expected, such social change would cause anxiety since the stable (whether just or oppressive) social system along with its norms, mores and uncritical assumptions regarding gender roles, was in a crisis. Women of the time negotiated this phenomenon in their own ways and struck their own balance between the domestic, traditional forms of life and the modern, public ethos. But to call this a national or nationalist issue with some sort of successful or attempted resolution is extremely misleading; it was a history that ran parallel to and not inexorably linked with the nation. It becomes even more incongruous when these notions are extended to cinema which had its own dynamics and evolution, and was only tangentially linked to matters relating to nationhood. Further, it is important we disarticulate modernity, with its far more global implications, from the nation, which though the stage on which modernity played out, had a limited role to play in its conditions.

In the next section, we look at how perceptions and representations of sexuality have imbricated dance in Hindi cinema, while also arguing that despite this or rather because of the prevalence of this dominant impression, it is imperative to dig into the narratives of desire as they are built into the film and move the conversation beyond debates on morality and the nationalist contract—whatever the latter may be.

Song, Dance and Sexuality: a history

Early Cinema: Dance and Respectability

As mentioned above, during the early days of cinema, acting was often considered disreputable and female performers were the object of controversy. Since

acting required public appearance and there was a taboo around the display of the so-called high caste female body, performers often came from courtesan backgrounds or were often played by Anglo-Indian women who were not encumbered by such restrictions. Actors in early cinema generally came from *tawaif* professions, they were courtesans or nautch girls.⁵ They were at the forefront of public cultural expression—with expertise in dance, arts, singing and often far more progressive and with fewer restrictions than women from so-called respectable backgrounds.⁶ They came to the industry with the increased persecution of their profession as nautch girls. The ban on nautch girls was an important part of the missionary-nationalist consensus on women's sexuality that treated these performing women as morally and socially deviant.⁷

Nautch girls had enjoyed royal patronage for a long time, but within the British colonial system, they acquired a poor reputation akin to prostitutes. The campaign against Nautch girls was led primarily by the missionaries who objected to the seductive dance form, and this image was carried forward by some nationalist reformers. By the early 20th century, there were active laws banning their performances. Therefore, the history of song is not the same as the history of dance. Nautch has been much more controversial while singing was not. Due partly to the eroticism attached to dancing, and the campaign against nautch girls, nautch became a matter of morality rather than aesthetics and slowly faded away from public spaces

⁵ B.T. Rangachariah, 'Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927-1928' (Calcutta: Government of India, 1928), 33, <https://archive.org/details/reportoftheindia030105mbp/page/n5/mode/2up?view=theater>.

⁶ Rangachariah, 'Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927-1928'; Anna Morcom, *Courtesans, Bar Girls & Dancing Boys: The Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance* (Hachette India, 2014).

⁷ Grace Howard, 'Courtesans in Colonial India: Representations of British Power through Understandings of Nautch-Girls, Devadasis, Tawa'ifs, and Sex-Work, c. 1750-1883' (University of Guelph, 2019), <http://hdl.handle.net/10214/16082>.

and social gatherings. Reflections of this attitude to nautch can still be seen in the debates on bar dancers who are often considered “no better than” prostitutes.⁸

Prior to this, Parsi theatre often employed male actors to play female characters on the stage and female performers often belonged to a community of performing castes. This too was not always easy. Rangoonwala recalls the difficulty of hiring female performers for the first indigenous film *Raja Harishchandra*; the role of Queen Taramati was eventually played by a young man named Anna Hari Salunke. It was in Phalke’s production of *Mohini* that we see the first female performers on-screen. Durgabai and Kamala thus earned the distinction of being the first women to act on screen. Kamala’s dance sequence is also the first such performance in cinema.⁹ Performed as a scene before the gods, this performance reaffirms the importance of religious themes as well as the predominance of classical and folk elements in dance in early cinema.

Commenting on this period i.e., between 30s to 50s, Neepa Majumdar has argued that questions of respectability intersected with the stardom of actors. She argues that female actors were subject to scrutiny both on and off screen—the roles the women played or the circulation of their lives as star texts in extra-diegetic media such as magazines and in public culture in the form of rumours or gossip, frequently evoked questions of respectability. The publicness of the profession often fed into the precarity of their moral identities, even as their on-screen roles affirmed and reinstated familial morality. She proposes that stardom up to the 50s in Hindi cinema

⁸ Anna Morcom, ‘Indian Popular Culture and Its “Others”: Bollywood Dance and Anti-Nautch in Twenty First Century Global India’, in *Popular Culture in a Globalised India*, ed. K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake (New York: Routledge, 2008), 125–39; Maya Pundit, ‘Gendered Subaltern Sexuality and the State’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, no. 32 (2013): 33–38, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23528026>.

⁹ Firoze Rangoonwala, *Indian Cinema - Past and Present* (Clarion Bks, India, 1984).

draws on the interface between on-screen and off-screen persona of the female actors as “cultured ladies” produced within the context of respectability filled with anxiety around women’s public display of selves, essentially their bodies. In her analysis of Nargis and her son Sanjay Dutt’s career with reference to Jaddanbai, the mother of Nargis, who came from the lineage of courtesans, she draws connections between their controversial personal lives, and their symbolic status as stars. According to her, the career of the stars is closely related to the persona created in film magazines through gossip and articles on their personal lives. The on-screen idealization of the female figure interacted with the ‘un-cultured’ personal histories of the female actors to produce the star-text.

Female actors were subject to scandal, accused of being immoral. For an Indian woman to show her face on the screen, for the pleasure of audiences across the country was a matter of great controversy. This argument echoes across analysis of female stardom in the early stages of the industry. Indian women were governed by codes of respectability even in their everyday public lives, particularly upper-caste women were made to follow strict rules of conduct while, as some scholars have maintained, the ‘lower-caste’ woman, regarded as the ‘woman of the bazaar’ often enjoyed greater public mobility at the expense of being regarded as available for male consumption.¹⁰ It is only after the 1950s that acting became a viable and respectable profession for women. The ICC describes the prohibitions of “social class” that disallowed the presence of “cultured Indian ladies” on the Indian screen.¹¹ The same did not apply to men. This changed with Durga Khote who came from a respectable Maharashtrian high-caste family. As Majumdar reminds us, Leela Chitnis and Durga

¹⁰ Sumanta Banerjee, *Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull Books Pvt.Ltd, 1989).

¹¹ Rangachariah, ‘Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927-1928’, 33.

Khote were advertised by the studio as “educated, respectable”, women with ‘caste Hindu origins” indicated the transformation of the social status and the discourse of respectability in cinema.¹²

Women of ‘the Golden Age’

The Nehruvian period, as it is called, primarily because Nehru was the prime minister at that time—from the late 40s to 60s—is characterised as an era concerned with nation-building.¹³ The transition to the post-independence nation demanded of popular culture the representation of hope and transformation. Development of the industrial economy and scientific enterprise co-existed with a socialist economy concerned with the erasure of oppressive practices while advocating social upliftment. In cinema this contract between the two represented a sense of hope and new beginnings in a period known commonly as “The Golden Age of Hindi Cinema”.¹⁴ The Golden Age is so called both for the association with classics and for its reformatory ambition. Raj Kapoor’s films, according to Priya Joshi, were a homage to this era, and to the vision of Nehru. In several of his films, Raj Kapoor presents the stories of the working class, presenting himself as a Chaplin-esque hero of the people. The film *Shree 420*, for instance, captures the story of Raj (Raj Kapoor) who arrives in Bombay hoping to make something of himself. At the very beginning, the metaphor of the city of Bombay as the ‘city of dreams’ becomes obvious. His travel to Bombay symbolises the hope for employment with the growth of urban development and demonstrates the place of the city in cinematic imagination. The narrative tells the

¹² Neepa Majumdar, ‘Real and Imagined Stars’, in *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only: Female Stardom and Cinema in India 1930s-1950s* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 81.

¹³ Raka Ray and Mary Fainsod Katzenstein, ‘In the Beginning, There Was the Nehruvian State’, in *Social Movements in India* (USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, n.d.), 1–31.

¹⁴ Ziya Us Salam, *Housefull: The Golden Age of Hindi Cinema* (Noida: Om Books International, 2012).

story of his rise to fortune through cheating and his prodigal return to the working-class public whom he inadvertently cheats in the course of his rise. If Raj Kapoor's films were fables on allure and betrayal in the city, other films of the period such as *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953) and *Mother India* (1957) represented the struggle against the feudal structure in the village.¹⁵

This era is said to symbolise the nationalist resolution wherein clear demarcations between tradition and modernity, between codes of honour and shame were visible in cinema. As Neepta Majumdar writes:

In the Indian context, the 'New Woman' is quite different in meaning and appears half a century earlier as a figure of domestic anxiety over the intrusion of British administrative and legal control into the space of the home. By the early twentieth century, the 'woman's question' was 'resolved' to the extent that a new model of 'Modern Indian womanhood' aligned with nationalist goals had emerged.¹⁶

Majumdar's view reasserts Chatterjee's argument and has been very influential in understanding the politics of cinema and sexuality. Nevertheless, as we will argue in the case of cabaret, these positions regarding the politics of cinema are impervious to its pleasures and desires distilling them as nationalist enterprises. Also, there is no clarity about the precise way in which the British administration and legal system intruded into homes. As we pointed out earlier, it is also not clear what the connection is between womanhood and nationalist goals, given that the latter were almost entirely about freeing the country from British rule.

¹⁵Bimal Roy, *Do Bigha Zamin*, Drama (Bimal Roy Productions, 1953); Mehboob Khan, *Mother India*, 1957. For an analysis of cinema and city in Raj Kapoor's work, see Aarti Wani, *Fantasy of Modernity: Romantic Love in Bombay Cinema of the 1950s* (Delhi, India; [New York]: Cambridge University Press, 2016). See also Joshi, *Bollywood's India*.

¹⁶ Majumdar, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s*, 62.

While the question of morality was an important one for many films of the period, several films challenged the image of the 'ideal new woman'. The song sequence in particular is an understudied site for the transactions of gender and sexuality of the period. The analysis of this period has been obscured by the concept of respectability, which though significant, tells us little about the cinematic form, or the complex negotiations inevitable in the making of a film. *Sahib, Biwi aur Ghulam* (1962), a well-known commentary on the crisis of feudalism and its endorsement of patriarchy, is one such example.¹⁷ Based on a Bimal Mitra novel of the same name, the film has been analysed for its defiance of social norms: its doomed romance is often seen as a critique of the feudal structure, but it is also a fable of decay—the decay of the heroine in the film takes place through her slow decline into alcoholism. *Sahib Biwi aur Ghulam* presents a complex tragic figure in the form of *Choti Bahu*, played by Meena Kumari, her story structured around feudalism and conjugality. The film tells the story of *Choti Bahu* through the perspective of her manservant *Bhootnath* (Guru Dutt). The narrative revolves around her inability to win her husband's affection, played by the actor Rahman, who busies himself with drink and courtesans. The husband himself is another symbol of the corrupt values of this structure.

According to Patricia Uberoi, the character of *Choti Bahu* is torn between Duty, Dharma, Desire and Destiny.¹⁸ Basing her argument on the idea of love while critiquing the study of feudalism in the film, she claims that the film is essentially a treatise on relationships between the different characters, rather than a criticism of the

¹⁷ Guru Dutt, *Sahib Biwi aur Ghulam*, 1962.

¹⁸ Patricia Uberoi, 'Desire and Destiny: Rescripting the Man-Woman Relationship in Popular Cinema', in *Freedom and Destiny: Gender, Family and Popular Culture in India* (New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

feudal structure.¹⁹ The tragedy of her situation is her inability and desperate desire to achieve the social ideal of love within the boundaries of conjugality. (A figure of unrequited love, her turning to alcohol to numb herself from torment is a kind of gender equivalent of the character of *Devdas*—the tragic, lost hero who takes refuge in substances to numb himself from the pain love brings, on which several films have been made in different languages). The film subverts the image of the ideal film heroine, portrayed here as a pitiable but endearing outcast. The narrative captures her as a frustrated housewife and the songs invite sympathy, expressing her interiority in a way that the narrative does not allow in an overt manner. The popular song, “Na Jao Saiyan Chudha Ke Baiyan” (Don’t leave my hand, love) uses the symbols of femininity, from the *bikhri zulfein* (unruly hair) and *khilta kajra* (blooming flowers), *mehki chunri* (fragrant scarf) to emphasise her expression of unrequited desire.

The close-up shots of her face, with the *bindi* prominently on display at once asserts her Bengali identity and her marital status. Throughout the song, *shringar*, the ornaments and rituals of beautification on the woman’s body symbolising the married state, are highlighted. At one point, the lyrics refer to the husband as the *shringar*, the embodiment of this symbolisation. The song intertwines the conjugal *and* the erotic to articulate an otherwise inarticulable desire. Another line from the song, *machal raha hai suhaag mera*, refers to the untranslatable *suhaag*, loosely the status of being married, but in this case a reference at once to the sensual, the erotic and the conjugal. The execution of the entire sequence happens in the confines of the bed itself, another

¹⁹ This view is open to argument since feudalism obviously overshadows the narrative of the film. Nevertheless, Uberoi has raised an interesting problem in our film analysis which often tends to privilege the study of social structure rather than other components of the film narrative which would present alternate readings of the film. The presence of feudalism, while necessary to acknowledge, by no means captures the possibilities presented by the film—of tragedy, drama and its emotional resonance.

symbol of martial sensuality. Sung by Geeta Dutt, the vocals of the song capture the tragic undercurrent of her seductive plea. The elements capture what is at the heart of the narrative, her unrequited, unfulfilled desire mixed with the silent reluctance of the male all within the space allotted to desire in the film, the bedroom.



Figure 2: Scene from film, *Sahib, Biwi aur Ghulam*. Source: Ultra Bollywood “Na Jao Saiyan Chhuda ke Baiyan—Meena Kumari, Geeta Dutt Sahib Biwi Ghulam Song”, YouTube, 3:47, 13 Sept 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCDbIT13MRY>

The film, beyond being a reference to the feudal structure, a theme built into the surface of the film, is also a film about female desire. It evokes the frustrated silence that haunts her marriage and counters it with her vocalisation of her emotion in song. The insertion of desire into the narrative as a feudal crisis, and its expression in the film’s music is an example of covert erotica that finds its way into the film’s universe. The articulation of desire in cinema is often in excess of the expressions available from within the narrative, the song provides a space to think beyond the new

woman, and the cinema and nation. While it has been argued that the film, placed in the period after the collapse of the feudal structure, captures its decay, this is a partial view of the film that does not fully capture its narration of sexuality. The song sequence in particular with its possibilities of lyrical grandeur has been one such space of expression. It limits an analysis of desire coded into film. Reinterpretation requires revising the binary that sees the representations of gender in films as moral fables on womanhood to explore what the constraints and possibilities were of expressing desire available in different films. Films often subverted or at least gave room to desire, restrained or apparent, of many of the women represented in this period of filmmaking.

Having said all this, it must be noted that the central theme of the film is about the social norm wherein, the 'decent' married woman is not supposed to express or even feel desire. She is supposed to only accede to the sexual demands of her husband as a matter of conjugal obligation. Expression of desire, as per this norm, is as such, unbecoming of a respectable woman. It is appropriate only for a 'loose' woman such as a courtesan. The film captures the irony of this norm where the same man who is shocked by expression of desire in his wife considers it totally appropriate to respond to and be complicit in the desire of the courtesan. The ground of this norm is essentially a deeply patriarchal anxiety that creates a binary in which the wife is rendered asexual, with all sexuality vested in the body of the prostitute or courtesan. Thereby, sexuality—the desire, the expression, even the satiation—marks the divide between the moral and immoral. The male, however, has the privilege to negotiate this binary by reducing his wife to the passive object of his desire, while enjoying the active eroticism of the courtesan. The film is a sensitive portrayal of this

phenomenon, which is not confined to feudal society but goes deeper and is a fundamental feature of patriarchy in all its forms.

Therefore, when we look at films like *Sahib, Bibi aur Ghulam*, we must pay these films the courtesy of recognising their multi-layered richness; they are a commentary on female desire, patriarchal dual standards and feudalism. This movie itself depicts in very nuanced way the intersection of these hierarchies.

Divided women

According to Sarita Heer and Geeti Sen, the respectability of women in Hindi film is rooted in the transgressions implied both in the geographical and metaphorical outside of the home.²⁰ It is within the space of the home that the woman's respectability lies, any movement outside the home is doomed to end in tragedy. For instance, in *Fire*, it is the love of two sisters-in-law outside the bonds of marriage that provides any reprieve from their circumstances. Yet, they claim it is also the outside world that offers the woman any sense of freedom and the possibility of transformation. as *Charulata* (1964), *Bhumika* (1976), *Sahib Biwi aur Ghulam* (1962) and *Fire* (1996). Neepa Majumdar who traces primarily the idea of off- and on-screen respectability in relation to the stardom discourse also relies on the taxonomy of the *andar/bahir* woman i.e. the woman as a divided presence, split into respectable tradition and the disreputable modern—this conflict is often seen to be the domain of the vamp, a point made by Ranjani Mazumdar which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.²¹ The theme of split presence—one traditional and the other subversively modern has been the guiding framework to study gender in cinema. By

²⁰ Sarita K. Heer and Geeti Sen, 'Feminine Fables: Imaging the Indian Woman in Painting, Photography and Cinema', *Woman's Art Journal* 26, no. 1 (2005): 58, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3566542>.

²¹ Majumdar, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s*; Mazumdar, 'Desiring Women'.

the 50s this divide between the chaste and unchaste woman was often expressed by the presence of this woman, the one who visited nightclubs, or danced in them. The Hindi film heroine is seen as the embodiment of the spiritual and moral anxieties of the post-independence nation. It has been often proposed that the distinction between virgin and whore which has been endemic to much feminist analysis is made visible by the stock characters of the heroine and the courtesan. According to Booth, the *tawaif/devi* (courtesan/goddess), or what Ruth Vanita terms the *bai/devi* (courtesan/goddess).²² This theme of split presence—one traditional and the other subversively immoral has been the guiding framework to study gender in cinema. Whatever the terms employed, it is this binary that remains the focus of scholarship on the period. But this view is not only simplistic but anachronistic as well.

First of all, we must remember that the issue is not that of morality in the broad sense but specifically sexual morality. As far as sexual morality is concerned, the moral-immoral divide is as old as humankind. However, the axis of this divide is not home and the outside world; the axis is marriage. As Sumita Chakravarty has asserted, the woman's "social identity (was) conferred by marriage."²³ A woman in wedlock is moral; she may be contingently immoral, say, if she commits adultery. But a woman out of marriage or without marriage is intrinsically immoral. Her very being outside the sanctified space of marriage makes her immoral. Even if she is virtuous in other ways, she would still be an otherwise virtuous sinner. Her virtue is a commendable aberration.

²² Gregory D Booth, 'Making a Woman from a Tawaif: Courtesans as Heroes in Hindi Cinema', *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 9 (December 2007): 1–26; Ruth Vanita, *Gender, Sex and the City* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited - New Delhi, 2012).

²³ Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987* (University of Texas Press, 2011).

Further, being outside marriage, she was regarded as necessarily inimical to the institution of marriage and everything that goes with it—such as fidelity, loyalty, honour, and so on. With socioeconomic changes and the development of urban spaces, the woman outside marriage had to find (or had to be assigned) a space. That space obviously could not be home since marriage was the very foundation of home. She had to be an outsider to home and ply her trade or practice her immorality in a space that is necessarily public.²⁴ The English term ‘public woman’ to refer to a prostitute indicates this fact.

Given that this woman did not have a husband to support her financially, she had to earn her living. The almost only way for her was to sell her body, which made her a commodity. She was the creature of the market place. The Hindi term ‘*baazaru aurat*’ captures this perception. In the urban spaces, depending on various circumstances, her space was the colony of the prostitutes (which had an ambiguous, duplicitous outside-ye-inside relation to society, of simultaneous dependence and rejection, of simultaneous need and contempt) or the night club or some such place where she could find patrons. Consequently, the nightclub dancer could easily, without too much modification, be conflated with the immoral woman who was, among other ‘vile things’, was a destroyer of marriage. Even when she did not destroy marriage, by catering to the ‘obscene’ fantasies of the male (which he cannot associate with his ‘moral, decent’ wife) she robbed the sexual rights of the married woman. This actually is the theme that runs through many films, and is poignantly depicted in films like *Sahib, Biwi aur Ghulam*. We can find variations of this theme practically everywhere. It is in this context that the concept of a ‘vamp’, and her

²⁴ Banerjee, *Parlour and the Streets*.

composite portrait made up of all the components we mentioned above, came into being.

This distinction between the woman within and outside the institution is a running theme across both the cabaret dancer and the courtesan. Gregory Booth writes that *tawaif* films are a way to address “socio-cultural anxieties.”²⁵ He draws on Jameson who suggests that popular culture is a space for the consumers and producers to ameliorate cultural anxieties, in this case, anxieties over women’s bodies and gender identities.²⁶ He goes on to describe the *devi/tawaif* distinction as follows: the *tawaif* is a courtesan, free of any patriarchal custody, a character that often allows the narrative to contend with questions of female respectability, social power and exploitation. *Devi* (or *behen* etc.) on the other hand is the suffix given to respectable woman, who is either elevated as a goddess or a member of the family, thus beyond sexualisation. Booth further argues that narrative often transform the female protagonists from woman (respectable) to *tawaif*, or in some cases, from *tawaif* to woman i.e., the splitting of their moral identity and subsequent destiny or reconciliation drives the narrative.

He notes that in the Hindi film the romance is the moment of the taming of the woman’s sexuality purely for the gaze of the hero. Further that when women are central protagonists in the Hindi film, it is usually to tell the story of sacrifice. Jyotika Virdi resonates his statement in her chapter on the courtesan film: “When women are afforded centrality, they suffer: their sacrifice, restraint, forbearance, chastity, and

²⁵ Booth, ‘Making a Woman from a Tawaif: Courtesans as Heroes in Hindi Cinema’, 4.

²⁶ Fredric Jameson, ‘Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture’, *Social Text*, no. 1 (1979): 130–48, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466409>.cf. Booth, ‘Making a Woman from a Tawaif: Courtesans as Heroes in Hindi Cinema’.

stoicism strengthen and ennoble them in the face of hardship.”²⁷ According to most readings on the period, the chastity and honour of the lead female character is central to the narrative. As Booth comments, her clothing, her dance is a spectacle for the male, the hero within the narrative. Her dance in provocative costumes and suggestive lyrics is addressed either to the hero or as a ruse within the narrative to eventually restore order. It is the dancing woman’s body that has been a particular site of these controversies and debates as a metaphor for unbridled sexuality. This trope of heroine/vamp continues to haunt discussion with the rise of the masala film.

When we speak of dance, we should be mindful of the context and the kind of function it performed. In the *kothas* of the courtesans, dance was in itself an entertainment but also a way of alluring the clientele. However, the courtesan had access to culture: she could recite poetry, she knew etiquette, and was refined in her tastes. The fact that in many films the dancer was identified with the vamp should not be allowed to mislead us into thinking that a dancer was necessarily ostracised. As pointed out above, notwithstanding the fact that dance as cultural performance always existed, the attitude towards the dancer betrayed the fundamental dishonesties of civilization. Someone had to perform certain roles which were either necessary or valued, but the person performing that role had to be held at arm’s length. In order to understand this, we need to grasp the deep ambiguities in sexuality itself. Sex was naturalised as a biological need but at the same time it was invested with fantasies. In other words, sex was Janus faced. One face was that of a respectable, invisible act, and the other was that of a lurid and wild experience that was consciously enjoyed. The former was the mask imposed on the wife, the decent, respectable and pious

²⁷ Jyotika Viridi, *The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History*, 122.

woman, and the latter was the visage of the courtesan. The actual everywoman herself who had both these faces was never acknowledged as real: her being had to be eternally split along this axis.

The Masala Form and the Continued Split

The death of the 'Golden Age' is often said to mark the beginning of the 'masala' film, also called the formula film.²⁸ In melodrama, the representation of womanhood depends on the Manichean divide and there is no easier way to establish this divide than through the known trope of the good/bad woman since conquering evil is an inherent condition of melodramatic catharsis, and even the vamp needs to be regarded from within this form. The masala form sees the accentuation of the split between respectable and disreputable dance through the split between the heroine and the vamp, the latter of whom often played a cabaret dancer. Therefore, before we discuss the place of the so-called vamp within this cinematic universe, it would make sense to place her figure within the aesthetic norm of films in the period.

Masala is a term loosely used to refer to a set of films with a standard idiom in their films—intense action and romance, interspersed with a number of songs, and often an eclectic mix of various genres. One could say that by the 1930s, some formula of Hindi film—rooted in song-dance performances, action and emotion was already consolidated, and songs had become a fixture in films. But there was a proliferation of a particular melodramatic narrative structure in the 60s that continued into the 80s. Commercial films are so called due to their supposed interest in economic success over artistic merit. This is a confusing notion, since despite the

²⁸ Joshi, *Bollywood's India*.

apparent lack of aesthetic judgement, commercial cinema is made keeping in mind audience tastes and cannot afford to appear crude to its target audience. The crudity of the elite may be the elegance of the plebian. These films do however often rely on a rollercoaster of emotions and sensations to jolt their audience into delight. This particular phase of cinema is also regarded as one of the poorest in the invention of a cinematic language, though the formula film could be thought to have its own aesthetic. If the films of the 60s and 70s often included cabaret sequences, by the 80s this had turned into a disco sequence.²⁹ This is shown in a *Filmfare* issue of 1983, which also mocks the state of cinema of the period for its reliance on standardised narrative elements and resolutions. As we will see in the next chapters, it is this attitude towards cabaret and disco as part of low or mass cinema that also makes it important to address. The disco marked both the disintegration of film music and the death of cabaret and became an important transition for attitudes towards sexuality and modernity as the formula (discussed below) began to crumble.

²⁹ Any such claims on cinema as identifiable by phase is bound to be only partially true, despite the popularity of the 'formula' there are two crucial points that are left out, one, that even within the formula there was often enough invention that requires a detailed analysis, and secondly, there were several films during the period which either saddled the line between formula and art cinema, or were markedly different while being part of this period's commercial cinema. Nevertheless, this period is often regarded as a period of little innovation.



Figure 4: Filmfare cartoon on the masala film. Mohan Sivananda, 'Twinkle', *Filmfare*, 1 March 1983. Source: National Film Archive of India

The formula ensured that a standardised trope of gender was often used, with its black and white universe being mapped onto the gender representations as well—thus we see a standardised trope of the good and bad, the traditional and modern male and female. The representation of sexuality at the time was thus neatly structured by this binary. The split of the heroine and the 'other' woman is visible even in early cinema as the separation of the actor and the dancer on screen/or on-screen stage performer, this binary was also part of the song sequences with certain provocative numbers reserved for the vamp while family friendly performances were reserved for the heroine. The role of the heroine and vamp meant they occupied different spaces in their dance performances. Thus, the vamp would often perform cabaret at a nightclub, or perform in a villain's lair to seduce the lead while the heroine often performed on stage for college shows, before the family or the hero etc. Though cabaret songs were often seductive, they are also voices of desire and romance, they could very well hint without overt gestures of seduction while the love songs of the heroine were often contained in their desire by attire, situation, movement or lyrics.



Over to the saree... Helen in "Bhoola Na Dena".

Helen
"Heroines
are no
competition"
 by Indu Gupta

As a dancer Helen wriggled and wiggled, showed a lot of leg and cleavage and alternately looked inviting and coy. She could still carry it all off with aplomb were it not for the nagging desire to prove herself as an actress.

34



Photo: Umesh Vyas.

"SIZZLING", "sexy", "scintillating" are only a few of the adjectives they used in the trailers when they described Helen's dances. And every film worth its salt had Helen dancing. They draped her in furs, put on body paint, gave her the itziest bitsiest dresses and occasionally allowed her to wear a saree only to have it disappear somewhere in the middle of the song.

Helen was a must, a Helen who titillated and had more sex-appeal than all the other stars put together. Only incidental was the fact that Helen is a good dancer who manages to do the most revealing cabaret without cheapening herself in the process.

Which is why it has always seemed so strange that on screen the hero has usually preferred the heroine to Helen.

Now all that is on its way to changing. Because Helen will no longer be seen mainly in the role of vamp. Suddenly Helen the dancer is facing stiff competition from Helen the actress. And at last count the latter seems to be winning.

Helen herself is very thrilled about this change that her career is taking. In a conversation much punctuated with the use of "dear", she talks about her career from the time as a 12-year-old, 4 feet nothing child she started dancing to the current Helen, now dancer now actress. Before she begins I steal a look at her and like what I see. 5'6", a fabulous and of course much-looked-at figure, hair tied back and no trace of age in looks and voice.

As a little kid—12½ to be exact—Helen, the little refugee from Burma, was padded front, behind, shoulders, the works, and placed in front of the camera. She worked as chorus dancer for one year. A little Manipuri, a little Kathak, and a lot of Bharat Natyam helped and soon Helen found herself leading the group of chorus dancers whose ranks she had so recently occupied.

Figure 5: Helen's interview. Indu Gupta, 'Heroines are No Competition', *Filmfare*, 34. Helen was the most popular of all cabaret dancers. Notice the juxtaposition of her two forms, the sari and the cabaret outfit and her description as "sizzling", "sexy", "scintillating". These words, expressions and movements were limited to the cabaret dancer, not even the courtesan was available for such consumption

The cabaret dancer of the 50s through 70s was often associated with the underworld—sometimes gangster's moll and sometimes simply as a character in the landscape of crime. Occasionally, she played the sex goddess with a golden heart who surreptitiously assists the hero or becomes the story of a doomed romance. In the 1968 film, *Kahin Din Kahin Raat*, Helen plays the character, Helen—a cabaret dancer associated with the criminal Pran nath (played by Pran). She falls in love with

the hero, Biswajeet who plays Suraj and is himself in love with Sapna who stars as Poonam.³⁰ In the course of the film, Helen finds that her love is unrequited and the affair an act. Despite this, she assists the hero in foiling the plans of the villain and dies in the process. The film is littered with a number of cabaret songs at crucial moments—the lively “Kamar Patli, Nazar Bijli” (Slim waist and lightning eyes); the melancholic and rare ghazal in a nightclub, “Hum pe Ilzam yeh Kyun hai ki Mohabbat ki hai” (Why am I accused of falling in love) and finally, “Mohabbat ho gayi Jinse” (the one I have fallen in love with). In *Teesri Manzil* (1966) Helen stars as Ruby, a cabaret dancer in love with the hero, Rocky played by Shammi Kapoor and her eventual end—the all-too-predictable, death of the cabaret dancer—is a result of her attempts to save the hero from harm. When the dancer plays a role in the film, these are some of the common themes that figure in her narrative—alliance with crime, unrequited love and eventual death. Her desire is often unrequited, or is reciprocated only as part of an act. In these and countless such films, the presence of the cabaret dancer was a cautionary tale, arisen from the anxieties around women’s participation in public space. The ‘public’ figure of the cabaret dancer representative of the public woman of the emergent socio-economic transformations that demanded the participation of women in civil society. Further, it has also been observed that they usually have minority names, and in certain cases, minority origins, indicating Anglo-Indian, or at least non-Hindu heritage, usually without a surname, an important marker of identity in the country.³¹ This lack of identity shows us the illegitimacy of her identity, she need not be named, and is otherwise insignificant, her death, a testament to her illegitimate desire. Despite the impossibility of romance, she often

³⁰ Darshan Sabharwal, *Kahin Din Kahin Raat*, Action, Crime, Thriller, 1968.

³¹ Jyotika Viridi, *The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History*, 168; Jann Dark, ‘Representations of White Western Women in Indian Film and Media’, *Transforming Cultures Ejournal* 3, no. 1 (February 2008), <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/TfC>.

plays the role of a public romancer. It is this space between desiring, desirable and undesirable that prefigures the cabaret dancer.

According to Anustup Basu, this illegitimacy is due to the feudal family contract in Hindi film. Following from Prasad's assertion that Hindi cinema is structured as a feudal family romance, Basu asserts that the vamp signals a feminine body "capable of partaking in the patriarchal monopoly of sexual pleasure."³² Within the Hindi film, the primacy of the family over the private desires of the individuals means that the presence of romance and sexual pleasure must necessarily be ceded to the demands of the family. Within this context, the objectification of women remains justified, but sexuality must not be spoken of. The desiring woman must be continually banished from the narrative. The separate positions assigned to the cabaret dancer and the heroine in the films prior to the 80s are proof of the dichotomous existence of women in cinema, they also highlight the perceptions of sexuality of the time where female respectability was still valued and it was only through this otherization that transgressive sexual desire could enter the film. Sometimes, this juxtaposition is expressed by presenting the two women in the same room—the dancer as she displays her sexuality and the lead protagonist as she watches in horror. While the heroine was the site of virtue and "Indianness," the vamp's body suggested excess, out-of-control desire, and vices induced by "Western" license."³³ Sometimes, this look of horror is transferred to the situation for instance in "Mera Naam Hai Shabnam", from the 1960 film *Patang*, where the juxtaposition between Bindu's body and Asha Parekh's face is the part of the

³² Anustup Basu, 'Face That Launched a Thousand Ships: Helen and Public Femininity in Hindi Film', in *Figurations in Indian Film*, ed. Meheli Sen and Anustup Basu, 2013th Edition (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, n.d.), 145.

³³ Mazumdar, 'Desiring Women', 86.

narrative tension as Asha Parekh is afraid of her past identity being discovered.³⁴ This binarization is said to restore the moral order of the film. Kasbekar suggests that the presence of the woman neutralises the voyeurism.³⁵ This issue of voyeurism and resistance in the cabaret sequence will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Early scholarship on cinema and gender often notes this as part of a dyad, the classic mother/whore complex that has driven the study of sexual difference in a good/bad woman dichotomy.³⁶ This split also refers to the Manichean universe of films where characters are always graded as heroes or villains, as heroines or vamps. Female desire has no place within the narrative. Her desire transgresses social codes becoming intolerable, and eventually annihilated. This is expressed beautifully in the 1967 film *Raat aur Din* by Jabbar Hussain which tells the story of Baruna/Peggy, where the personality is split into two.³⁷ This divides the female protagonist between the home and the nightclub, playing the coy wife in the day and the pleasure-seeking woman at night. This film best allegorizes the conflict between metropolitan subjectivity and the interior cultural self that was often embodied by the body of the woman in nationalist discourse. In the film, Peggy/Baruna, Nargis's last and rather un-impactful role, plays a schizoid split between an urban woman, marked by her dress, name, her smoking habit and importantly her flaneuse exploration of the modern city life's spaces of pleasure such as clubs and its other Baruna, a shy and quiet wife of a perplexed husband. This doppelganger self is found yearning for city life, her desire finding final expression in a psychiatric breakdown. The narrative is

³⁴ Hargobind Duggal and Suraj Prakash, *Patang*, Comedy, Crime, Drama (Asiatic Productions, n.d.).

³⁵ Asha Kasbekar, *Pop Culture India! Media, Arts, and Lifestyle* (ABC-CLIO, 2006).

³⁶ Shoma A. Chatterji, *Subject Cinema, Object Women: A Study of the Portrayal of Women in Indian Cinema* (Parumita Publications, 1998); Kasbekar, *Pop Culture India!*

³⁷ Satyen Bose, *Raat Aur Din*, 1967.

finally resolved when Peggy finally disappears and the last image of the film shows the father and the husband on both sides of a subdued Baruna in a frontal shot. This narrative closure provides the audience a return to the symbolic space of law with the return of the woman into the conjugal fold. The fascinating aspect of this representation though, lies not in the narrative's return to the normal order but the sequences in which Peggy plays out her fantasy and fascination with urban life. This division becomes explicit in the cabaret sequence where the 'public woman' was a threat to the sanctified order of the home.

The vamp/cabaret dancer is seen as the crisis of modernity framed on the female body. Anutsup Basu, for instance, traces the history of the 'modern girl' from the beginnings of Indian cinema to the cabaret performances by Helen to indicate the anxieties that surrounded the modern woman. According to most work on the modernity of the vamp/ cabaret dancer, it is the westernisation of the vamp—expressed in her modern attire, her (sometimes) blond wigs and blue eyes, her smoking and drinking which are emphasized. These set her apart from the female protagonist who is usually devoid of these mannerisms and enjoys a more comfortable social and moral status unlike the cabaret dancer who is considered without morals. The clothing, behaviours are all part of the decadence of modernity and its impact on women. These definitions of modernity often skim the surface of the interaction between modernity and female sexuality expressed through these markers, they disregard the emphasis on the modern character of the female protagonist and fail to sufficiently define modernity as a phenomenon and the modern woman as a character trope with consistency.

In the previous section, we discussed how tradition and modernity draw on the nationalist construct of ideal womanhood. As suggested then, this binary, often ill-defined, is far in excess of the nation. Since Hindi cinema, as the first chapter asserts, cannot claim status of national cinema, similarly, the female body of Hindi film is not contingent upon the nation. Rather, to understand the complexity of sexual mores and representations, we need to regard the multi-dimensionality of society and how other features—such as capitalism, changes in the market, in social attitudes and behaviours influence representation and are in turn produced out of this exchange. The good/bad distinction which draws on the presumed nationalist construct of the east/west, falls short of understanding the complex ways in which questions of modernity, sexuality and emerging tensions on sexual mores were continually reiterated and resolved by the narrative or presented as elements outside narrative. As Preben Kaarsholm states in his introduction to *City Flicks and Urban Experience*, Hindi cinema itself is “a site for contestations with modernity”.³⁸ In Hindi cinema, the song and dance sequence often make the female body the terrain of this struggle. Thus, while the vamp was often a dancer of the public space, for the female protagonist, there would usually be the private spaces such as bedroom, dream sequences or at permitted events such as weddings, college performance or festivals. These sequences legitimized the dance of the heroine, while the dream sequence sublimated female desire to the space of fantasy thus neutralising its threat.³⁹

As one can see, the tradition/modernity split continues to play a central role in understanding sexuality in the Hindi films of this period. The period which begins with the binary of the heroine and the cabaret dancer ends with the reconciliation of

³⁸ Preben Kaarsholm, ed., *City Flicks* (New Delhi: Seagull Books, 2004, 2.

³⁹ See Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, *Cinema India* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2002) for a discussion of the dream sequence and romance in Hindi film.

this figure as the new ‘modern’ heroine. In the next chapter, we will look at the aesthetic ramifications of this shift.

Section II: New Approaches to Song-dance and Sexuality

This final section touches upon a newer theoretical model that has become endemic to discussions of song-dance and sexuality. Star theory has become a popular means for understanding Hindi cinema, this is no surprise since the star is a significant part of film’s economy. Despite its relevance, star theory is one of the many possible interpretations of cinema and the cinematic bodies. This section apprises the reader of the shifting narrative of star theory while criticising the theory for downplaying the enigmatic presence of the star and using the term star as a substitute for all kinds of actors and celebrities. By critiquing this concept, the chapter also signals the possible textual approaches to song and dance, with particular emphasis on the choreo-musicking body proposed by Usha Iyer. Though her work is concerned with stardom and with production, her work also leads us in a different direction which helps drive home the assertion that cinema is a conjunction of the audio-visual. The theories discussed above, and most work discussed below tend to focus on either the singer or the dancer. They are also image heavy, relying primarily on the visual aspects of performance to arrive at their conclusions. As the later chapter will demonstrate, the representation of women happens not only through visuals, but their conjunction with the aural. To understand the place of the cabaret dancer is also to pay attention to this melange of hybrid, purportedly ‘western’ inflections of rhythm over the cabaret dancer’s body.

Star Theory as Method

Star theory refers to a range of interventions—the study of star persona, of their presentation in public life and techniques of self-fashioning; the representation of the star in media; the study of their filmography and characterisation; cultures of fandom and star worship. In Indian film studies, a prominent body of work is dedicated to the identity of the star on-screen and their off-screen popularity and persona. Of particular importance has been the study of the interface between cinema and politics through the star. This is true especially of south Indian cinema where stars have gone on to become successful political leaders.⁴⁰ Star theory is the study of the spectatorial engagement offered by cinema. It falls within reception studies which studies how audiences engage with and interpret cinema and is considered particularly relevant in Indian film studies where fan admiration can often border on *bhakti*.⁴¹

The concept of the star first emerged during the era of the studio system when major production houses usually worked with actors on a contractual and exclusive basis.⁴² The stars were often groomed and a star persona was often constructed around them. The popularity of the production houses generally relied on these stars. In its contemporary form, the star usually refers to someone with a large fan following due to which they often have enough traction to draw in crowds. The star is understood first and foremost as a saleable and reliable commodity. But the term ‘star’ in stardom

⁴⁰ Srinivas S.V, *Politics As Performance*, 2013th edition (Ranikhet: Orient Blackswan Private Limited - New Delhi, 2012); M. S. S. Pandian, *The Image Trap: M.G. Ramachandran in Film and Politics*, First edition (Los Angeles ; London: SAGE India, 2015); Madhava Prasad, *Cine Politics*, 2014th edition (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited - New Delhi, 2014); Uma Maheswari Bhrugubanda, ‘Genealogies of the Citizen-Devotee: Popular Cinema, Religion and Politics in South India’ (Columbia, University of Columbia, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.7916/D8ZS33KN>.

⁴¹ M. Madhava Prasad, ‘Fan Bhakti and Subaltern Sovereignty: Enthusiasm as a Political Factor’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 29 (2009): 68–76, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40279290>.

⁴² Sean Redmond and Su Holmes, *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader* (London, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446269534>; Richard Dacordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America*, Reprint edition (Urbana, Ill. Wantage: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

discourse is used very differently from its usage in public discourse, and unless we disentangle these see terms—icon, star, celebrity, superstar there is bound to be confusion over who qualifies as a star.

There have been three forms of analysing stardom—identity, distribution and reception. Each of these is linked to the industry's commercial interests, but of the three, the notion of star identity is most tenuous, since our understanding of stardom is occasionally motivated by such intertextuality, for instance, the past of Sunny Leone as a porn star feeds into her image as an item number dancer, but even in this instance, her other identities recede into the background. Thus, the privileging of identities by the scholar, who in forming a biography is forced to choose certain details always constructs a selective and subjective image of the star. Of course, it can be argued that the scholar is merely indicating what is already present, but often such analysis presumes that the one experiencing the film has little awareness of the ideological content of the text. The concept of star identity elides over the multiplicity of images that the audience experiences. The audience is firstly impacted by a whole set of elements that cannot be treated as singular. Secondly, this also assumes that each member of the audience receives the same message, is seduced by the same meaning of the symbol and understands the film as a collective.

In the case of the song, despite the role played by the star in popularising a song, the star is one aspect of its affective universe, part of the constellation of cinematography, choreography, editing, musical tunes, the mise-en-scene, the singer's voice all of which compose a song, and the narrative which generates its emotional intensity. The star, thus, has a supplementary role in the song's success and is constructed through an interaction with these other elements that make up the song. The song does not only comprise of stars but can become popular in its own right,

attain a certain kind of stardom. In the case of the item number, often the dancer is either a typecast character or is unknown, in such cases, the song may become a way to launch their careers, but such fame is generally short-lived. It indicates stardom by its absence rather than its presence. It is true that increasingly, stars feature in such numbers and their inclusion brings layers the song-text with meaning while simultaneously constructing an image of the star, but the star is also caught in the song as is the audience. The audience is engaged through this interaction between star-text and song, in which the star is part of the song-text, but also through this, is constructed by the text.

Despite this construction, the meanings of the star are neither fixed nor uniform. Richard Dyer considers stardom to have multiple but “finite meanings.”⁴³ But as John Ellis has argued, the star is composed by contradictory meanings, it is an “incoherent image” in which various filmic and non-filmic existences of the star exist simultaneously.⁴⁴ This brings us to the final point, the intermixing of the filmic and the non-filmic, i.e. the on-screen and off-screen persona of the star to understand the production of the star-text relies on a mixed methodology, including film magazines and biographical details of the artist’s life as relevant to the construction of their star persona. The personal life of the star or even the public life presented in film magazines etc. is a construct which contributes to the impressions they make on the audience, the roles they are given etc. This premise on the relationship between biography, on-screen representation and stardom forms the crux of star theory.⁴⁵ This

⁴³ Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, 2nd ed (London; New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁴⁴ John Ellis, ‘Stars as a Cinematic Phenomenon’, in *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2007), 90–97, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446269534>.

⁴⁵ Christine Geraghty, ‘Re-Examining Stardom: Questions of Texts, Bodies and Performance’, in *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2007), 98–110, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446269534>.

is contrary to much of the popularity of the ‘star’, often renowned for their roles rather than how they conduct their personal affairs.

This does not mean that the private life of the star is insignificant, often our gossip magazines and newspaper articles on the star contain ‘juicy details’, usually to titillate the masses and these comments require to be understood with scepticism. Film magazines are part of film cultures but are also themselves discursive mediums that seek to unconvincingly create an image of the star. These details feature significantly in reception studies, but in the study of the song text and its formal elements, the star is a construct of the interaction of the song text. The star or rather, the star body is produced through the song. The production of the star-text is far in excess of the biographical or even iconic details of the star. Here, we would like to propose that we need to pay attention to the screened body, or the screen and its interactions with society. The biographical approach to stardom theory tends to privilege personal details as informing the work of the actor. Such endeavours are prone to biographical fallacy which assumes that the speculative biography of the actor forms part of the understanding of their work. As the biography of the star is a careful construct through the language of the film magazines, news media, the posters etc. It forms part of a limitless set of contradictory meanings. The promotion of the star in a certain avatar is also not uniform across media, synchronically or diachronically. What can be said is that stardom is relational, it develops from the encounter between the audience, film text and the star body. Both the star and the fan are produced through this encounter. These, as has been argued throughout the thesis, are affective encounters—they rely on the mechanism of charisma and enigma.

The critical question then, is who manifests stardom and at what point does even a celebrity actor become a star.⁴⁶ As the reader on *Stardom and Celebrity* argues, the academic use of the term does “not always reflect in public discourse.”⁴⁷ Academic usage of the term is generally loosely applied to the performer who becomes the object of study. Yet it is understood that ‘star’ is not a term that can be applied uniformly to all actors, singers, directors or performers and artistes. If by celebrity we simply refer to someone who is ‘famous’, the star often has an ‘extra something’, an aura or presence that draws crowds. Further, the ability to draw crowds also often translates to economic success, thus, a star is often someone who is branded and marketed as a crowd puller.

In this, we can trace at least two definitions of stardom, the first definition refers to Max Weber’s analysis of *charisma* in figures of public authority. According to Weber, charisma is an indefinite, unidentifiable quality that endows certain individuals with exceptional powers, sometimes superhuman powers. Charismatic authority “is the authority of the extraordinary and personal gift of grace”, it involves “absolutely personal devotion and the personal confidence in revelation, heroism, or other qualities of leadership.”⁴⁸ The charismatic leader is a personality who has the power to control and influence crowds, and enjoys a degree of ‘devotion’ which is far beyond being famous, being a celebrity. ‘Grace’ is an abstract quality that one cannot simply pin down, the charismatic leader is distinguished from ordinary men, defined not on account of merit, but an authority which borders on mystical power. Weber

⁴⁶ Redmond and Holmes, *Stardom and Celebrity*.

⁴⁷ Redmond and Holmes.

⁴⁸ Max Weber, ‘The Sociology of Charismatic Authority’, in *From Max Weber* (Routledge, 2009) cf. Howard G. Schneiderman, ‘Authority, Social Theories Of’, in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (Second Edition)*, ed. James D. Wright (Oxford: Elsevier, 2015), 269–74, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.32008-6>.

indicates a crucial problem in defining stardom, a star is precisely that which is indefinable, what makes a star is this indefinable quality. Secondly, Weber also takes us to a very important point about 'affect' and how the appeal of the star cannot be fully explained by sociological or even psychological analysis. The study of stardom is the study of deciphering the inscrutable forces that translate into the popularity of an actor and of their films.

This concept is further refined by Richard Dyer who wrote *Stars* in 1979.⁴⁹ His analysis is neo-Marxist, focused on the commercialism of the star and the star's appeal in society. According to him, stars serve an ideological function, they are signs with a signification that leads us to understand their popularity among the public. According to him, stars are part of the "symbolic economy." His work introduced the study of film magazines, posters and other aspects of star presence which according to him contribute to the symbolic value of the star. His work draws on our second definition, Walter Benjamin's concept of *aura*. Stardom here involves the commodification of the object of reverence in a way that does not diminish their appeal, but only enhances it. In this case, the promotion of the star through magazines, posters etc. is part of the film's publicity and the publicity of the star. These often form part of the network in which stardom is entrenched.

He borrows Benjamin's concept to suggest that in cinema, cult value and the "aura" resurface in the star system. Using a number of case studies of Hollywood artists such as "Marlon Brando, Bette Davis, Marlene Dietrich, Jane Fonda, Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe, Robert Redford, and John Wayne" he demonstrates that stars are constructed; they are a carefully imagined set of values that attach themselves to

⁴⁹ Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald, *Stars*, New ed (London: BFI Pub, 1998).

particular individuals who become commodities representing and mirroring public concerns. Dyer's work has been particularly influential for the study of stardom since he links ideology with stardom. His work suggests that the star text expresses the anxieties and concerns of the political and socio-economic conditions of the time. They symbolise the values of an era. In his analysis of Marilyn Monroe, he argues that her demure sexuality contrasted with the movement for sexual freedom, particularly the debate over vaginal orgasms.

His work indicates how star-texts coincide with political concerns but the way he tries to demonstrate the validity of his claims is somewhat farfetched. To take the example of his analysis of Marilyn Monroe, while it is true that in many ways, she was iconic, to posit her as a single point contrast with the movement for sexual freedom, ignoring her several illustrious contemporaries is indefensible. What gave traction to that movement was essentially the invention of the birth control pill, thanks to which women could exercise their sexual freedom without fear of pregnancy. Demure sexuality had nothing to do with it. His attempt to link this entire phenomenon with the supposed debates about vaginal orgasm tests one's credulity.

Another relevant point in the context of the star theory is that, contrary to many claims in existing scholarship, quite often much of the popularity of the 'star', derives from their being renowned for their roles rather than how they conduct their personal affairs. This does not mean that the private life of the star is insignificant, often our gossip magazines and newspaper articles on the star contain 'juicy details', usually to titillate the masses and these comments require to be understood with scepticism. Film magazines are part of film cultures but are also themselves discursive mediums that seek to unconvincingly create an image of the star. These details feature significantly in reception studies, but in the study of the song text and

its formal elements, the star is a construct of the interaction of the song text. The star is produced through the song. The production of the star-text is far in excess of the biographical or even iconic details of the star.

The biographical approach to stardom theory tends to privilege personal details as informing the work of the actor. Such endeavours are prone to biographical fallacy which assumes that the speculative biography of the actor forms part of the understanding of their work. Rather, the biography of the star is a careful construct through the language of the film magazines, news media, the posters etc. It forms part of a limitless set of contradictory meanings. The promotion of the star in a certain avatar is also not uniform across media, synchronically or diachronically. What can be said is that stardom is relational, it develops from the encounter between the audience, film text and the star body. Both the star and the fan are produced through this encounter. These, as has been argued throughout the thesis, are affective encounters—they rely on the mechanism of charisma and enigma. We need to retain the concept of enigma within the ideological production of stardom, to extend and contend with the meaning and nature of stardom.

Theories of stardom have also become part of song-dance analysis. Neepa Majumdar drawing on Richard Dyer's comment remarks that the film song particularly is the "site of film's utopian impulses and therefore frequently represents the most idealised aspects of star presence."⁵⁰ Rajiv Vijaykar also comments that "the appeal of these songs has much to do with various factors relating to the intrinsic merit of the songs identified, but it also has often to do with the way the songs were filmed on-screen. Even more, on whom they were filmed." He further goes on to say

⁵⁰ Majumdar, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s*, 175.

that “hit songs and stardom usually go hand in hand.”⁵¹ Given the importance of picturisation, the star introduces another component of the cinematic spectacle. In Hindi Song Studies, the question of the star biography, star identity and how it plays into stardom is seen as primary to the analysis of song texts. According to Majumdar, film songs are “a major vehicle for star construction since the song sequence epitomises in every way the most spectacular aspects of star performance.” Within the star-populated Indian film industry, the song in particular is considered to be a “star vehicle.”⁵² Film songs, according to her, are seen to be indelibly attached to the stars as ‘free-floating signifiers’ who become associated with particular stars.

This view, however, suffers from misplaced emphasis. A song can sometimes be a *launching vehicle* for an actor. He or she may capture the attention of the audience. But songs are not the vehicle that carry the actor’s stardom in a sustained way. It is true that hit songs in particular often owe part of their success to the star, but the song sequence is necessarily a product of several factors. It is the synthesis of various elements that produces the emotional content of the song. In the case of the Hindi film song, it is the affective input of the song, the interaction between the symbolic value of the star and the sensory experience of the song which generates the song text. There are two main studies in song—the study of the singer or the aural star and the dancer/actor or the visual star, both of which will be summarized below. But as the conclusion asserts, a proper analysis should take into account the dancer, singer, music director and actor as interactive and mutually responsive elements that together create the song-dance. Such analysis would have the merit of being cognizant of the delicate ecology of the song where different elements balance each other.

⁵¹ Vijayakar, *The History of Indian Film Music*.

⁵² Majumdar, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s*, 175.

Hindi Film Song and Stardom

Aural Stardom

An early essay on the stardom of the singer was developed by Sanjay Srivastava in his analysis of the voice and persona of Lata Mangeshkar, though the concept was named and defined later in the work of Neepa Majumdar.⁵³ Srivastava attributes the popularity of the singer to her image as “virginal” and “maternal.” According to him, her national popularity is a result of what her image signifies through her demeanour and choice of songs. From the posture in which she sings to her voice, they are all expressions of an ideal femininity—middle-class, austere and moral. Thus, she represents, according to him, the values of the middle-class Indian. His work links the body language of the person Lata Mangeshkar with the status of Lata the singer, indicating that the two overlap with the lines between two blurred. His focus is on the role of self-fashioning of the singer and her representation in public life in the construction of her image. Further, his work also stresses the need to look behind the screen at the various artists who make cinema possible and their contributions to cinematic cultures. Having said this, it has to be pointed out that the popularity of Lata Mangeshkar cannot be captured by attributing them to her persona. Few people are even aware of the details of her personal life. Further, to link her phenomenal popularity as a singer to her personal image is an insult to her voice and singing skills as well as the audience.⁵⁴ Secondly and equally importantly, this analysis breaks down when applied to any other singer, male or female. An analysis

⁵³ Sanjay Srivastava, ‘Voice, Gender and Space in Time of Five-Year Plans: The Idea of Lata Mangeshkar’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 20 (2004): 2019–28, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4415027>.

⁵⁴ Ashwini Deshpande, ‘Lata Mangeshkar: The Singer and the Voice’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 48 (23 December 2004): 5179–84, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4415842>.

that does not provide us with the tools to analyse other similar phenomena has very limited value.

The concept of “aural stardom” was proposed by Majumdar in her work on female stardom and the film industry in its nascent period between 30s to 50s. According to her, the concept presents three characteristics: the first is the “voice recognizability”, the second, “the circulation of extra-textual knowledge” and finally the “moral” and emotional traits of their voices”.⁵⁵ The first refers to the uniqueness of the voice and its easily identifiability in public spaces, it also recognises a fan-following; the second refers to the biographical details and the image of the artist in various other media and finally, the moral traits of the voice refer to its identification with a set of tropes. She hypothesizes for instance that singers become identified with certain roles. Thus, Asha Bhonsle’s voice was associated with “oozing sensuality...a compelling come-hither-ness which makes her slotted for the cabaret and disco numbers.” She quotes the music director Naushad Ali who states that ‘Bhonsle’s voice “a tinge of bazaar in it’...the younger sister wraps up all the hot numbers.”⁵⁶ Her analysis can be helpful in understanding some of the images and iconography circulating around the singer, but they also tend to essentialise the voice of the singer, ignoring a vast repertoire of their performance which is often a mixed bag of numbers, despite the likelihood of performing one more often than others.

Guilty of a similar essentialisation as Sanjay Srivastava, her work ignores the essential adaptability of the singer who, her body overshadowed by her voice in public sphere, can exercise greater autonomy through her relative anonymity. Asha Bhonsle for instance, sang everything from Bhajans to pop numbers, while Lata

⁵⁵ Majumdar, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s*, 189.

⁵⁶ Majumdar, 190.

Mangeshkar sang *Aa Jaane Jaan*, one of the most popular cabaret numbers picturised on Helen. While, these may be isolated instances, they highlight the propensity in the discourse of stardom to characterise stars as tropes, ignoring the fluidity of these identities and their symbolisation in the public sphere. It raises questions on the relationship between the tenuous performativity of the voice and the performances of self-representation by the singer which are also engaged in a dialogue with the audience. Barring few exceptions, little extra-textual knowledge plays any role in the case of the singer. The voice is a versatile and elusive aspect of the singer, it works along with other elements and it is this that makes one song popular over the other. The versatility of the voice and its interrelation with other components needs to be studied as a dynamic and affective exchange rather than as a singular, isolated object of study.

Dual Stardom

Another proposed concept in the study of song, stardom and sexuality is that of the song as “dual star text”, referring to both the singer and the actor. According to Majumdar, “Songs are very often associated with and promoted as performances of the actors, as much as the singers or music directors.”⁵⁷ Vijayakar in concurrence states that, “the success of an actor and a singer are interconnected, and the popularity of one can reinforce the popularity of the other.”⁵⁸ Majumdar, adds that song combines these visual and aural pleasures to create a “composite star.”⁵⁹ The body-voice dichotomy of the singer/actor are simultaneously produced star texts. In all of this scholarship, song is treated through its relation with the singer and actor,

⁵⁷ Beaster-Jones, ‘Evergreens to Remixes: Hindi Film Songs and India’s Popular Music Heritage’, 428.

⁵⁸ Vijayakar, *The History of Indian Film Music*, 103.

⁵⁹ Majumdar, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s*, 162.

What is significant is that the study of aural stardom argues that the singer can also drive the popularity of a song, and often albums are sold as collections of a singer's body of work. The market is constantly looking to appeal to the expectations of the listener and the singer is part of the branding of the song designed to generate interest. Popular music is characterised by its fidelity to convention, its conformist musical style whose primary intent is profit-making. The two are interrelated, musical fandom and appreciation demands a stable convention of well-liked or standardised tunes that meet the expectations of listeners and therefore generate more appeal. Yet this relationship is further complicated by the fact that the song must strike a balance between meeting expectations but also challenging or contradicting them to make the tune memorable. The aural star is part of the commercial package that makes a song successful along with picturisation and score. Finally, and most importantly, much of this is not true of film songs.

Further, star identity and its influence are highly subjective and based partly in speculative notions of its signification which tend to exaggerate the role of these tropes in the making of the cinematic experience underplaying how the song, its mood, melody and imagery, generates an emotive and affective experience for the spectator. The stardom of the singer is in certain cases secondary to the popularity of the song, as a striking melody by an unknown voice may appeal to a listener more than the discordant tone of a much-loved artiste. Singers such as Sharda, the Bangladeshi singer Runa Laila are good examples of this. More recently the popularity of Himesh Reshammiya began with such an unknown song. This is not to deny that aural stardom has a role in Hindi cinema. While taking note of the singer's role in creating the song's impression, one must consider also that, in the ultimate analysis, it is not through the coordination of these various piecemeal elements of

singer, sound, lyric, dancer that a song becomes popular but its capacity to move us, enchant us, entertain us and bring us joy. As Aarti Wani reminds us, it is the “play of sound-image” between the singer and the star, but also between the sounds and the movements that affect our experience of film.⁶⁰ According to her, voice is only one among the diverse and complex strands of creative and commercial agencies, effects, media and forms that made the Hindi film song.⁶¹

A critique of stardom

Despite the role played by the star in popularising a song, the star is only one aspect of its affective universe, part of the constellation of cinematography, choreography, editing, musical tunes, the mise-en-scene, the singer’s voice, all of which contribute to a song. In addition to it there is also the narrative which creates the situation for the song and generates its emotional intensity. The star, thus, has a supplementary role in the song’s success and is constructed through an interaction with these other elements that make up the song. The song does not only consist of stars but can become popular in its own right, attain a certain kind of stardom. In the case of the cabaret song, the song needs to be regarded not through the star-body text, since the cabaret dancer is rarely accorded the status of a star—even Helen, who is perhaps the most popular of the dancer received little attention from the media of her time. This will change with the emergence of Zeenat Aman and Parveen Babi. But beyond the star bodies and sounds of cabaret lie the experience of cinema through the eyes of a viewer who has little knowledge of the background of the star. The overdetermination of star theory in the analysis of the film song has led to a recession

⁶⁰ Wani, *Fantasy of Modernity*, 126.

⁶¹ Wani, 126.

of cinematic analysis of song. This work deliberately moves away from star theory, of which examples can be found elsewhere, to look at the sights and sounds of the film.

It could be argued that there are also other kinds of stardom, if they can even be called that, some linked to the movement or the interjection itself—for instance, a song is remembered for the way it enters the narrative—it creates an emotional impact in excess of the ‘star’ such that it is the song and its affective possibility which attracts fame—it has its own popularity in terms of tune, lyrics etc. which is also partly what allows it to recirculate from the *Antakshari* to remix. It is what gives life to the song outside of the singer and actor. At the same time, the reputations of the music director/composer, or in case of some, even the choreographers (consider Saroj Khan and Farah Khan), or lyricists such as Javed Akhtar or Sahir Ludhianvi are just as important and are part of the production package. Nevertheless, these are often not considered stars. These elements are best understood as a combination in songs rather than as divisible units. The popularity of songs across Hindi film culture is informed by this multiplicity and this layering of various units of production. The singer and actor, though crucial to our understanding of Hindi film culture are also not necessary conditions for the success of a song, and our understanding of cinematic song cultures needs to draw on concepts beyond those of representation and star-texts to understand song. The relationship between the listener/audience and the film song is shaped by a range of often elusive factors of which stardom is one part.

Usha Iyer considers the dance performance, the body and movement of dancer and the cinematic space as important frames of reference for understanding the song-dance. Her concept of “choreo-musicking body” explores choreography in terms of how the stars and their performances negotiate complex caste and class dictated

notions of female bodily performance. She invites our attention to the “multi-bodied choreo-musicking body” described as:

composed of the conjoining of the playback singer’s voice, the on-screen performers’ moves (including those of the “background” dancers), the choreography team, the music director’s composition, the often-nameless musicians who produce the instrumental soundtrack for the number, the carpenters and painters who construct the set for the dance number, among many others.⁶²

Her work on choreo-musicological theory explores various actors such as Vyjantimala and Madhuri Dixit to demonstrate how in the case of popular dancers, choreography was constructed to match the movement of the star and became an important part of the construction of the song.

In *Choli ke Peeche Kya Hai* for instance, she asserts that it was her upper-caste Maharashtrian identity that brought respectability to the seductive song sequence. This work repudiates the theory of considering the dance form as produced over the musical score, proposing an approach which is cognizant of how the skill and reputation of the dancing heroine often overshadowed the musical sequence, her performance suspending the musical sequence for the visual display of her skills. By turning on its head the concept of ‘song picturisation’ into the concept of “dance musicalization”, she suggests that we follow the residues of dance that coexist and sometimes are in excess of the musicality of the song, such as remembering dance steps associated with a particular song. The song according to her, provides a point of view from which one can think about song-dance as movement image and aural impression, or rather the musicking of dance and the choreography of music. While her work focuses on the figure of the star since it concerns itself with the popular

⁶² Iyer, ‘Film Dance, Female Stardom, and the Production of Gender in Popular Hindi Cinema’, 124.

dancers of the period, we can take away from her, her prescient analysis of the formal elements of song as well. This screened body of the dancer is her musical body—it is animated and produced through the combination of movements, sounds and cinematography to create an immersive affect.

Many features of dance, singing, *mise-en-scene*, composition, camera, techniques of editing play their parts in the machinations of cinematic fantasy. Film song (regardless of its place of origin) is built on these interactions between dance, actor, technology and the singing voice. Its production, as others have pointed out, is the outcome of multiple people's creative labour including the composer/music director, lyricist, and orchestra. At the same time, it also builds new encounters with the audience on the screen and off. Its composite language exists as a complex art form that merges several practices of both cinema and theatre while also enjoying a separate existence as popular music unbridled by the cinematic narrative and the film as such. The issue of sexuality in the Hindi film song is thus complicated by these various factors which exceed the limitations of gaze theory, compelling renewed engagements with the question of female sexuality in the Hindi film song. This work resituates the debate, which has been largely conducted over the representation of the female body in the song-dance sequence, to suggest that both the disarticulation or integration of voice and body beg a fresh set of questions for researchers of cinema, gender and popular culture. Above all else, the study of Hindi film requires the suspension of any universalist claim and a close analysis of individual instances that are in some way typical or paradigmatic.

While it may be argued that there is a need to separate the singer and the dancer, the song and the dance as they emerge from separate histories and are brought together to interact with the camera and the *mis-en-scene*, the

cinematography/picturisation and the narrative, the privileging of one over the other demonstrates a fundamental misconception regarding the filmmaking process.

Instead, from within the song-text, one can approach the question of how its meaning and the iconography of its stars is constructed, not as representation of an image, but as a collective feeling of fandom, of its pleasures and the enigmatic relation between the star and the fan.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates some of the earlier and more recent approaches to the dancing woman in Hindi cinema. Beginning with the divide on tradition and modernity manifest in debates around the private domain of home and the public domain of civil society, scholars have commented on the continuity of this split within Hindi cinema and its representations of women. This splitting is also proved useful for an analysis of the cabaret dancer, but this work turns our attention away from the conceptual lynchpin of nationhood to reframe the representation of women as part of a conjugal anxiety and of the conditions of modernity. The cabaret dancer, or the courtesan represent the outside of the familial order. By being ‘public women’, they rebel against the private desires of heterosexual conjugality in cinema. Reframing the debate, this chapter concludes that while respectability remains a contentious issue surrounding the dancing woman, more recent approaches to cinema have also indicated the relevance of the star-body of cinema. In the case of the cabaret dancer, though, it is difficult to employ the term ‘stardom’ without its evaluation. The cabaret dancer is seen in this work, not as a star body but as an affective body—as a body of sensations. Further, the new approaches have also brought our attention away from respectability to the formal and textual components of the song and dance sequence as

well as processes of production and consumption. While critiquing the star theory approach, this chapter retains the conclusions arrived at through the scholarship on song, dance and sexuality to argue that a more critical and thorough analysis of the musical and visual elements of the sequence is needed.

Bodies and Sounds of Cabaret: Hindi Film Song and the Playscape

Introduction

Between the decades of 50s and 60s, and lasting up to the 80s, cabaret performances had become a staple feature of popular cinema. Though cabaret sequences made an appearance much before this period, it is with the 60s that they became emblematic features of the ‘Bollywood masala’ films.¹ During this time, the cabaret also took on the aesthetic flavours of its period, becoming louder, with grand, absurdly larger than life and overwhelming sets, and chorus dancers accompanying the cabaret dancer. The cabaret performance brought together sound and body to create a symphony of sensuality. Though much has been written about the cabaret dancer and sexuality, particularly through her juxtaposition against the figure of the heroine or female lead, there has been little work on the performativity of desire and eroticism in cabaret. Instead of denying the eroticism of the performance in order to reclaim it or disparaging its inherent misogyny and objectification of the female body, this work is interested in understanding the narratives of desire which are generated and sustained by the cabaret performance. The quite influential resolution theory which we discussed above disregards its complex relation with expressions of desire and narrative, with the emotive potential of the scene. There is a need to rewrite the history of the cabaret number by looking beyond that dichotomy and study more

¹In *Muqabla* (Batak Bhatt and Babubhai Mistri, *Muqabla*, Action, Drama, 1942), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OifXsW7OLzc>. Nadia plays the dual role of a nightclub dancer and the rich daughter of a merchant separated at birth. Her character, Rani, was forced into becoming a nightclub dancer by the villain. Madhuri, the rich daughter provides a moral contrast to Rani, she is the one who finds love in the end while Rani meets her death. On another point, as indicated elsewhere, the term ‘masala’ film is misleading and derogatory. Nevertheless, it hints towards a certain pattern of filmmaking involving character tropes and a combination of narrative strategies which brought together song-dance, intrigue and comedy.

closely the negotiations of the cabaret number and its formal aspects which tell a slightly different tale of sexuality in cinema.

The cabaret dancer stands in the liminal space between the private-public coding of sensuality. She embodies not only desiring bodies, but also the desirable body. Her public expression of desire simulated before an audience, and the language of individual, private love, and her position as an object of private, sexual desire places her both as a public woman, as well as a metaphoric expression of private fantasy. The seductiveness of the performance—shots of the woman writhing in pleasure, often looking straight at the camera, at the audience, though not different in its cinematography, is distinguished by its expressions of desire. The cabaret sequence alternates between the desiring and the desirable woman.² Her performance, often on a stage in a restaurant or in the nightclub, is rife with sensual overtones; her outfit, manner and dress—in fact, all elements—are designed to generate erotic appeal, yet the publicness of the performance, discouraging any private pleasure of the voyeur. Further, the cabaret sequence also engages in a display of coyness, the dancer mocks male desire and shies away from it. Therefore, the cabaret not only narrates desire and desirability as written over the body of the woman, but also its disavowal. If the cabaret outfit drew on cosmopolitan culture, it also contained the threat of this body through the modesty of the body suit underneath. The cabaret woman wore costumes designed to heighten visual pleasure such as tribal outfits, vaudeville, arabesque, etc. while preserved her chastity through the use of obvious stockings.³ Her body thus implemented seduction as well as a form of censorship.

² Mazumdar, 'Desiring Women', 90.

³ Mazumdar, 'Desiring Women'; Morcom, 'Indian Popular Culture and Its "Others": Bollywood Dance and Anti-Nautch in Twenty First Century Global India'; Asha Kasbekar, 'Hidden Pleasures: Negotiating the Myth of the Female Ideal in Popular Hindi Cinema', in *Pleasure and the Nation: The*

The cabaret song is not necessarily uniform in its exhibition of the erotic. It is most frequently a combination of love, longing and intrigue. It has a certain vocabulary—the heroine sits among the audience, or ambles in a crowd, without a hint of being an object of desire. Her ambling through a crowd is a reference to her publicness, while her mockery becomes her restraint. Sometimes in the duet, the lover appears, granting a focal point for the desire of the dancer. This form of coupling is transitory, or/and rarely has a positive outcome. Her definition of love, which could be declaratory or clandestine, her potent sensuality is mellowed by the presence of a partner, and sometimes chorus dancers who invite the audience to look at the performance. The presence of chorus dancers accompanying the cabaret dancer is mainly aimed at making the dancer stand out against the backdrop, thus drawing our attention back to the body.⁴ The shots of body movements, face and instruments are all forms of choreographing the sequence to maximise the sensual effect.

The cabaret evokes a language of the erotic that evolved in relation to the figure of the dancing woman as a combination of pure eroticism and choreographic virtuosity—the latter often concealed in order to convey a sense of spontaneity—in order to foreground her seductiveness. The figure of the cabaret dancer has morphed from eroticised other to the desiring woman, her liminality marking her both transgressive and abject. These songs offer a reprieve from the construction of the ideal woman—she occupies the unfamiliar place between desiring and passively being desired, her desire in these cases finding expression in the medium of the song. Treating its components as a set of tropes or patterns that evolved as a language of the erotic, this discussion seeks to explore how the cohesion of sounds, bodies and spaces

History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India, ed. Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney (New Delhi: OUP, 2001).

⁴ Iyer, 'Film Dance, Female Stardom, and the Production of Gender in Popular Hindi Cinema'.

construct the cabaret sequence. If the nightclub places her as an urban public woman, the song-dance sequence further enhances the performance of seduction through its conjunction of sound and movement. Cabaret produces a particular grammar of “the screened body” through a series of tropes, and musical, choreographic and cinematographic techniques.⁵ To understand the narratives of desire is to look more closely at the placement of the body and cinematic sounds, the juxtaposition of body with space, but also to look at the lyrics which explicitly express desire. This chapter introduces an interpretative lens to understand the micro-narratives of desire in cinema.

The sequence is intimately tied to the Bombay noir of the 50s, and to the masala film period of the 60s and 70s. It was absorbed by the new heroine of the 80s, embodied by stars such as Zeenat Aman and Parveen Babi who played both the hero’s love interest as well as cabaret dancers with ease, and has had a discontinuous history through the item number.⁶ Concurrent with the development of this new heroine of the 80s was the rise of Disco, which brought masculinity to the nightclub sequence, converting its dangerous cosmopolitanism to an embrace of a new ludic, youthful modernity. The cabaret and the disco sequences thus also demonstrate the development of music and dance in line with a new global cosmopolitan sensibility with the nightclub as a metonymy of the city.

⁵ I am drawing the term ‘screened body’ from Erin Brannigan who explores the interconnections and representations of choreography on screen in her book. Erin Brannigan, *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶ See Jyotika Virdi, *The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Anustup Basu, ‘Face That Launched a Thousand Ships: Helen and Public Femininity in Hindi Film’, in *Figurations in Indian Film*, ed. Meheli Sen and Anustup Basu, 2013th Edition (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England ; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, n.d.), 139–58 for mention of this transformation; Mazumdar, *Bombay Cinema*; Suneeti Rekhari, ‘Sugar and Spice’, in *Bollywood and Its Other(s): Towards New Configurations*, ed. Vikrant Kishore, Amit Sarwal, and Parichay Patra (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 133–45, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137426505_9. have also written briefly on the connection between cabaret and item number.

Before we proceed with our discussion on cinematic cabaret, it is worth noting that the cabaret of film also drew its inspiration in part from the cabaret in Bombay. In *India Cabaret*, Mira Nair captures this much-ignored part of the public life of the 70s.⁷ The film is also a form of historical document of the tapestry of sexuality that permeated the everyday lives of the city. Through interviews with cabaret dancers and shots of their cabaret performances, she introduces their world to the audience. Unlike the film, the dancers wear very little and have no body suit, their stories humanize them and make us regard them not only as dancers but introduce us to their rich personal lives. The sets are those of dimly lit nightclubs, with glaring red lights, bare except for the audience and performers at the centre of the stage. Unlike the film, the cabaret sequence lacks the architectural ensconcing of female sexuality, and without the overwhelming presence of the set, the female body remains the sole focus of the gaze. This also reminds us of the staging of sexuality in the film sequence, where the playful and elaborate stage tone down the otherwise potent sexual overtures. The film set with its bright lights and often magnificent stages folds the body into its realm. In the documentary, the body speaks, unlike the cabaret dancer of the film. *India cabaret* presents to us a transgressive femininity that grabs power back from the cabaret audience and sits uncomfortably with a viewer looking to voyeuristically satiate sexual desire. Both the documentary and films on cabaret present to us narratives of female desire and indicate the playful and performative sexualities of popular culture.

⁷ Mira Nair, *India Cabaret*, Documentary, 1985

Cinematic Cabaret and Colonial Anxiety

In cinema, cabaret came to be associated with certain characters and actors and drew on a diverse and indefinite dance vocabulary to develop certain characteristics of dress, choreography, music, camera angles etc.⁸ Often, in academic discourse there is a conflation of the cabaret dancer and the vamp, but the two are very different figures. The cabaret dancer, may or may not also play a vamp-ish role. She often featured only as a cameo, or played the unrequited lover of the hero. The vamp on the other hand, simply refers to a woman who manipulates other characters and plays a negative role in the film. By this definition, there is a long history of vamps in cinema, of particular mention is the trope of the evil mother-in-law or sister-in-law. This is an important distinction to make since there abounds a range of discourses surrounding nation, gender and modernity that are pivoted on the vamp-ish portrayal of the cabaret dancer.⁹ By displacing the debate from her morality to her presence as a dancer, this chapter also reorients our understanding of the cabaret dancer as performer rather than object.

This language of the cabaret, its often-westernised outfits, the grammar of its movement which include vigorous bodily jerks, its rhythmic and vibrant music and cinematography require a closer analysis of its form. The sequence first came to Indian screen through American and British films. These films attracted debates on censorship and were a matter of great colonial anxiety. Cabaret was a matter of contention due to the perceived eroticism of the white women. In censorship reports, the sequence attracted the attention of officers who were quick to condemn it for

⁸ Madhurima Guha, *Main Gudd Ki Dali : Helen the 'Golden Girl'* (S.I. : LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, 2019) ; Beaster-Jones, *Bollywood Sounds*, 2015 ; Dark, 'Representations of White Western Women in Indian Film and Media' ; Rekhari, 'Sugar and Spice'.

⁹ Tapan K. Ghosh, *Bollywood Baddies: Villains, Vamps and Henchmen in Hindi Cinema*, 1st edition (Sage Publications Pvt. Ltd, 2013).

showing their women in a poor light. Cabaret scenes were an object of concern in the ICC 1927 report as they gave the wrong impression of western culture as licentious and immoral and presented the dancing woman for the pleasure of the “native” audience.¹⁰ According to Madhav Prasad, the censorship committee details the colonial anxieties about the ‘masses.’ Considering the masses uneducated, the British perceived that they were unable to apprehend the fantasy of film, this combined with the incidence of immoral characters and themes would potentially dilute British authority. The fears of the British which have been emphasised by Prasad were that Indians were being exposed to negative images of the west, particularly, watching white women in distress or in sensual performances like cabaret, this presents the white woman as available for mass consumption and encourages excitement towards her among the masses. They were also worried of the low opinion that the masses may form about the morality of the colonisers. On the other hand, it was argued that films from the west proved the superiority of the western civilisation—its technological advances, its claims to modernity. Further, concerns over morality and the reactions of the audience played an important role in setting regulations.

Further, many of the fears which motivated the committee were dispelled, either by confirming the sources, as in the case of the Social Hygienist council where

¹⁰ The report is an important document detailing the state of cinema at the time. The ICC report contains the testimony of countless organisations and individuals, both liberal and conservative and speaks to the varied and lively discussion on the role and scope of cinema. The failure to implement the suggestions had to do with the expectations of the British, who believed that the report would help their own films but instead, the report made recommendations to bolster the indigenous industry, a conclusion which was eventually disregarded. See Priya Jaikumar, *Cinema at the End of Empire: A Politics of Transition in Britain and India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). Its ultimate place in the colonial archive aside, the report has much to offer to a historian or a film scholar. Given that the report covered multiple film industries at a time when this cinema was just becoming popular offers an expansive view of the state of the industry at the time. The report is more than a prohibitive colonial text filled with biases against the ‘natives’, it is detailed document of the many views and attitudes towards the industry at the time, not to mention, its coverage of cinema halls, publics, and its nuanced distinctions between the audiences. The report is also an extremely helpful document to assess the state of the industry and the tastes of the audience.

it was claimed that these figures never actually watched the films or understood clearly how they were watched or by looking at the reactions of the audience to the film. In the case of romance for instance, the report disputes the argument that the films of the west become examples of the licentiousness of the west by offering an explanation that the pleasures afforded to the audience had to do with their self-identification with the characters and their emotional investment in the film plot, rather than the race- affiliations or origin of the film.¹¹ Further, another important concern, about the apparently provocative scenes that might elicit an erotic response, scenes of kissing for instance, were also dispelled on the grounds that the audience clearly understands the distinction between film and real life, and its enjoyment comes not from the eroticisation of the female body but from their identification with the ideas of romance.¹²

Another anxiety was in terms of the difference in customs; that Indians generally found scenes of kissing and intimacy unpalatable and often mocked or booed at the scenes. There were in this sense at least two opinions on kissing. One invoked the possible vicarious enjoyment of the masses—as Prasad quotes, the worry was that through the close-up scene, the ‘native’ would possess the woman.¹³ The closeup was thus regarded as scandalous. According to Prasad, this was because bringing as it does the audience close to the actor, it encourages identification and makes the ruler appear intimate to the ruled, diminishing the latter’s distant authority. In the cabaret—the close-up and the frontal shots have remained crucial to the

¹¹ Prasad, ‘The Natives Are Looking: Cinema and Censorship in Colonial India’. The report states that even in the case of Oriental villains and white heroes, the audience sided with the hero and the white heroine condemning the actions of the villain.

¹² Bose, *Bollywood*; Ramesh Dawar, *Bollywood: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (Star Publications, 2006), 12–15.

¹³ Prasad, ‘The Natives Are Looking: Cinema and Censorship in Colonial India’.

exchange of looks between the dancer and the non-diegetic audience and an exploration of its address reveals to us the complex play of female desire in the Hindi film song and dance. In this chapter, we will look at this complex through its interaction of sound, lyrics, space and movement to unveil the language of desire in the cabaret song.

Section I: Cabaret as Bricolage

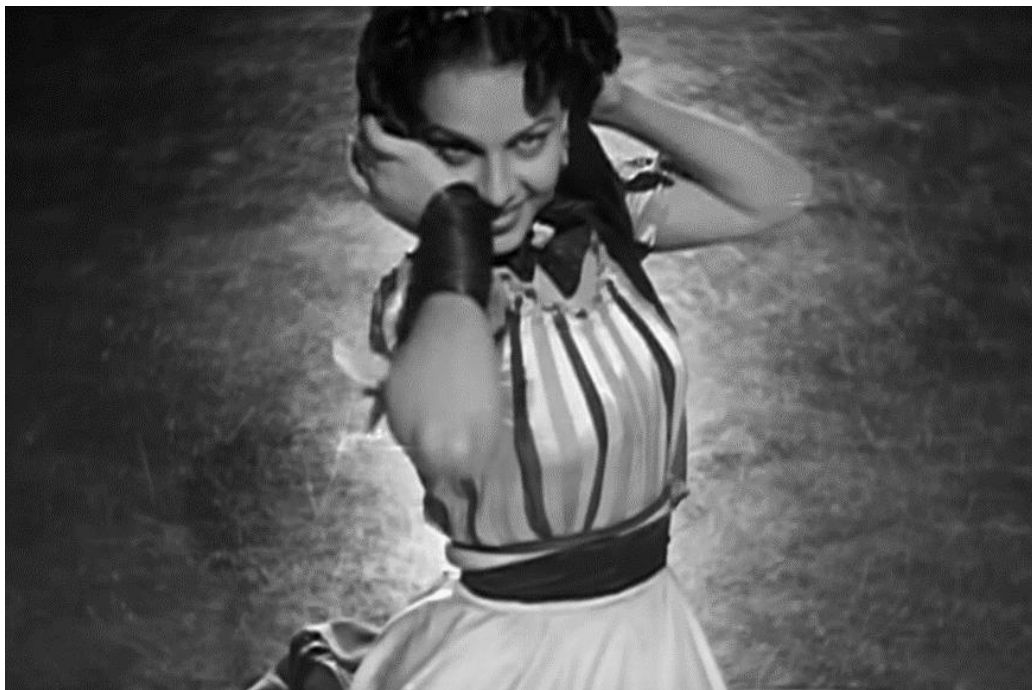


Figure 6: Cuckoo Moray in “Patli Kamaar Hai”. Her look at the camera as the camera returns her gaze is a common cabaret shot. As we will later see, this ‘look’ is an important part of the complex of desire in the cabaret. Source: Raj Kapoor Hits. “Patali Kamar Hai Tirachhi Nazar- Barsaat (1949) Songs- Raj Kapoor-Nargis-Lata Mangeshkar-Mukesh”, Youtube, 5 min 18 sec, 23 May 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xsa0AYlEm1I>

Introduction

In the song “Patli Kamaar Hai, Teerzchi Nazaar Hai” (your slim waist and sideways glance) from the 1949 Raj Kapoor film, *Barsaat* (1949), Cuckoo Moray is introduced through a trumpet solo—a sound that would come to be associated with the cabaret number— she appears before the camera, her face already in the motions

of dance, a seductive smile on her lips while her eyes flirt with the camera; facing the non-diegetic audience, she begins a two-minute solo with the camera panning out and in, moving sometimes to the eye-level, sometimes looking up towards the dancer demonstrating sometimes her skills in kathak, its multiple rotations spliced with shimmying shoulders teasing the camera, moving towards and then further away.¹⁴ The solo is pure expression—a combination of music and dance bracketed from any meaning in the narrative, or through the lyrics. The camera foregrounds her, and the mixed music shifts between western rhythms and Indian ragas, set against the grave voice of Mukesh that seems so at odds with the setting of the nightclub. The nightclub itself is arranged like a palace court with high arches and bright ceiling lights, its space designed to give room to the dancing woman, who is placed at the empty centre of the room, flanked by patrons at its edge.¹⁵ The entire song is sung by the male who subsumes her body in the narrative of his own desire and the scene is spliced with shots of Nimmi, playing the character of Neela, a girl pining away in the valley for Premnath who himself is flirting with the dancer. In this song then, the role of the cabaret in the narrative is quite in contrast with its expected role, it is a ruse to heighten the emotional content of the scene which is absent. The film juxtaposes these two worlds and two narratives of desire—one in a rural setting and the other, faraway with the luxurious lights and the rhythmic sounds of the nightclub. The stark contrast is expressed through the play of light and shadows—the club is well-lit and spacious, while in the other frame, the woman is crouched in a corner, braving a storm, its heavy rains and cruel winds. The cinematography creates a sense of space in one, and

¹⁴ Mukesh Kumar, "Patli Kamaar Hai, Teerzchi Nazaar Hai", *Barsaat* (Shemaroo, 1949), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xsa0AYlEm1I>.

¹⁵ This is very different from the 60s and 70s that showed a more involved performance with the dancer moving through and engaging with the audience. It will be touched upon again later.

of constriction in the other—while the dancer glides through the arches and pillars of the club, Neela is left rooted to the door of her hut, her face occupying the frame of the shot. The space, as is shown on the screen, shows us the expansiveness of the club and is contrasted with the narrow frame of Neela's hut. These frames also contain their movement and become allegories of their desire. The audience remains at a distance in the background as Cuckoo's body expresses the rush of the nightclub space, the music's fast-paced rhythms match the speed of her footwork, the whirls complimenting the sounds, showing us a space of fun and frolic, a world without worry. It is the rush of city life, of the dizzying courtship that follows without love, it is the narrative of two cis-heterosexual people who have met as strangers to celebrate the night, they hold no emotional bond over one another and, as the film would later reiterate, have no commitment to one another. In the other frame, Neela's face is consumed by stillness, moved only by fear and longing. The two body vocabularies—the juxtaposition of brokenness and exhilaration are affirmed by the sounds of the tabla in the face of sorrow, and the oriental-esque rhythms of the nightclub set to western instruments and rhythms. In fact, the entire song, in its rhythms, in its use of space—alternating between the nightclub and the hut and the forest of the rural setting are also designed to build this sense of contrast. Its lyrics too alternate between desire/lust and love, foregrounding the erotic in the former—the *patli kamar* and *tirchi nazar*, with 'pure' love in the latter, *aaja tera aankhon mein ghar hai* (come, you reside in my eyes). This song also typifies the expression of male heterosexual desire that is cabaret—the male voice as commentator subsumes the eroticism of her dance into its own fold. The sounds in their atmospheric presence contribute to the light-heartedness of the male, the violin drawing to a crescendo as he sings *main chanchal madmast pawan hoon, ghum ghum har kali ko choomoon*, (I am a wayward

intoxicated breeze, flirting around, kissing every flower) while the subdued sounds of the tabla match the tragic unrequited desire of the second lead. This song has already told us much about the cabaret sequence and the arrangement of sound, space and body in the Hindi film song.

As discussed in the second chapter, when song is combined with the screen, when it is given meaning within narrative— through a set of images of body, space and its sense of time— it takes on greater specificity of meaning, it becomes bound to certain bodies and images. The cabaret demonstrates the dance virtuosity of the cabaret dancer through a series of camera movements and its interplay with space and music. From its rhythms, its mix of jazz and middle-eastern, Hindustani sounds, its juxtaposition of pure love and erotica expressed by the second lead protagonist and the cameo dancer respectively in this case; its use of space, the open candour and joys of its sounds and movements all moving in sync towards a singular affective experience, the cabaret constructs a universe of desire and erotica, sometimes caught in the discourses of respectability and normative desire and sometimes subverting them.

The cabaret, according to the Oxford Dictionary of English, is a form of entertainment held in a nightclub or restaurant while the audience eat or drink at the tables.¹⁶ This definition does not do justice to the representation of cabaret as a dance form; it can be further defined as a sequence with overt erotic appeal and lack of structure. Thus, there are three components to a cabaret: location, erotic appeal and un-structuredness. It is framed by space and movement, its lack of any necessary connection with the narrative allows for play. In a cabaret performance, unlike a

¹⁶ See also, Guha, *Main Gudd Ki Dali*.

classical dance performance like Bharat Natyam, there are no codes for attire, dance moves and music—it can at most be defined as an unstructured performance with the sole purpose of enticing the viewer. While in classical dance forms, the body of the woman is embedded in the performance, as part of an ensemble and informed by a well-defined traditional language, in cabaret, the female body and eroticism are foregrounded. Cabaret also carries no pretence of being art, it is unable or unwilling to redeem itself through any aesthetic claims, whatever its artistic merits. In this sense, the cabaret is purely sensual. From its beginnings in 1880s Paris, cabaret has been “a variety programme that teetered on the verge of being explicit, while never actually getting there.”¹⁷ In Hindi cinema, the word often denoted the performance of an erotic dance number before an audience.¹⁸ This definition is limiting since it would imply that there is no distinction between a courtesan dance and the cabaret dance. But though similar in many ways, the aesthetics of the two vary widely.

In film studies, the dancing woman is often seen as the ‘other’. As courtesan or cabaret dancer she stands outside the moral order of the narrative—her wanton sexuality and expression of desire, her dance staged before an audience all mark her as the antithesis of the film lead and sometimes as a social outcast. The cabaret dancer was often a figure caught between gazes of desire and disgust—her morality condemned even as the music and dance are enjoyed. Thus, she is repudiated for her sexuality even as her performance is enjoyed. Jyotika Virdi attributes this to “doublespeak” which both repudiated and demanded sexuality.

¹⁷ As we will see further in the chapter, this teasing, the play of access and inaccessibility is an essential feature of cabaret.

¹⁸ Jerry Pinto, *Helen: Jerry Pinto* (New Delhi; New York, USA: Penguin India, 2006); Jyotika Virdi, *The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History*, 168; Rekhar, ‘Sugar and Spice’.

According to her:

This exhibitionism, pleasurable to the audience, is simultaneously condemned as immodest and prurient. Thus, the audience can enjoy the visual pleasure, the spectacular and erotic dance numbers, while morally condemning the woman in unison with the narrative.¹⁹

The cabaret dancer, like the courtesan is one of the few dancing women who generally do not meet romantic fulfilment. They are shunned and their sexuality disparaged. Both the figures threaten the familial order of the film. The courtesan, a character trope with a strong foothold in Indian fiction much before cinema, was seen as the exotic other who seems to refer to a sensuality that precedes the arrival of modernity. She is the product of an oriental fantasy, serving as a reminder of the sensual pleasures of an oriental life, captured on celluloid. The cabaret and courtesan sequences songs express heterosexual desire in unbridled ways, not contained by the guise of conjugality or religious worship. But while the expressions of the courtesan many a times are those of sorrow, the cabaret celebrates joy and invitation.²⁰ Unlike the courtesan who wants to find her way home, to a husband etc. the cabaret dancer is unrestrained, and open ended, so to speak, in her desire.

In this work, cabaret refers to a specific kind of performance as defined above. The Hindi film also often featured songs in the nightclub which involved only singing such as “Aage bhi Jaane na Tu”, (You don’t know what lies ahead), “Mud Mud ke na Dekh”, (don’t look at me that way), “A Beautiful Baby of Broadway”, “Listen to the Pouring Rain” these are excluded from this analysis since they cannot be considered cabaret when the communication of sensuality through dance is an important

¹⁹ Jyotika Viridi, *The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History*, 169.

²⁰ Banerjee, *Parlour and the Streets*.

component.²¹ We can include as ‘cabaret’ songs, songs that had the features of cabaret but took place in spaces like the bedroom, or the villain’s lair such *Husn ke Lakhon Rang*”, (million colours of beauty), “*Mujhe Chhuna Na*”, (don’t touch me), “*Pi meri Aankhon se aa*”, (come get drunk on my eyes) “*Yeh Mera Dil*”, (my heart is mad about love).²² These songs playing with seduction and evasion were more common in the 60s and 70s when cabaret became a more colourful form. Prior to this, songs such as “*Aaiye Meherbaan*”, (come my dear), extended an erotic invitation without the inclusion of dance.²³

Choreographers such as P.L. Raj, Herman Master, Hiralal-Sohanlal and Robert Master, and musicians like OP Nayyar, SD Burman, RD Burman, Shankar-Jaikishan, and the singer, Asha Bhonsle continually revised the landscape of the cabaret performance while also putting a language in place—the use of the ‘modern’ dance form and of jazz, rock, funk or disco derived tunes, its raspy sounds posited a link between the modernity of the performance and the presence and movements of the body—its various elements of set design, sound and dance—thereby reiterating the modernity of the performing body. Dancers such as Aruna Irani, Faryal, Cuckoo Moray, Padma Khanna, Bindu, Mumtaz, Helen, Nadira, Sheila Ramani, Madhubala and others gave life to the mechanics of desire through their movements. Though this work cannot do justice to their contributions, it seeks to explore, in a limited way, the

²¹ Asha Bhonsle and Ravi, “Aage Bhi Jaane Na Tu”, *Waqt* (Saregama, 1965), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ookSneuHOA>; Asha Bhonsle and Manna Dey, “Mud Mud Ke Na Dekh”, *Shree 420* (Shemaroo, 1955); Iqbal Singh, “A Beautiful Baby of Broadway”, *Ek Phool Char Kante* (Shemaroo, 1960), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AI5FE5Fw7SM>; Usha Uthup, “Listen to the Pouring Rain”, *Bombay to Goa* (Saregama, 1972), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jK_N2BAr4LE.

²² Asha Bhonsle, “Husn Ke Lakhon Rang”, *Johnny Mera Naam* (Universal Music India, 1970), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKTLF5B-F1Q>; Asha Bhonsle, “Mujhe Chhuna Na”, *Rahu Ketu* (Shemaroo, 1978), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQ0ULU-VRpc>; Asha Bhonsle, “Pi Meri Aankhon Se Aa”, *Dharkan* (Saregama, 1972), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SlRMda7FmHA>; Asha Bhonsle, “Yeh Mera Dil”, *Don*, 1978, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lUFitnpPihs>.

²³ Asha Bhonsle, “Aaiye Meherbaan”, *Howrah Bridge*, 1958, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gex-0maI56E>.

language of their performances to deepen our understanding of the imbrication of desire and song.

Body in Space

The spaces in film mark sites as signs. Each space signals new associations and new meanings, within this setup the space of dance in particular becomes an extension of the dancer's body, its meanings are often prefigured, both constituted by the film, and coming to the audience from a range of varied associations. The club, for instance, is often marked as the space of dance, particularly the cabaret. This is partly influenced by the clubs in places like Bombay, Calcutta and Cochin where cabaret performances were common, with places like Blue Nile in Colaba, Bombay operating till 1999, and clandestine performances continue.²⁴ But the relation between the non-diegetic club space and the diegetic club space is not a simple mirroring of one another, though these clubs influenced the dance, cinema brought its own attractions to the performance and the space. Further, the song sequence adds another layer of meaning to both the body and space, wherein these meanings are not neatly layered over each other, but are borne out of this juxtaposition. The dancing body, its movements, gestures, its body language and its voice meet the rhythms of the song, and through its gestures brings the space to life. The soundscape becomes part of the gestures, extending into the figural space of the scene. In the changing form of the cabaret, we see this collusion of space with bodies and sounds.

²⁴ Baljeet Parmar, 'Cabaret in the City', www.dnaindia.com, n.d., <https://www.dnaindia.com/mumbai/report-cabaret-in-the-city-1144976>.

The Changing Form



Figure 7: Geeta Bali in “Sharmaye Kaahe Ghabraye”, (why be shy) from the film *Baazi*. Source: Shemaroo Filmi Gaane “Sharmaye Kahe Ghabraye-Geeta Bali-Dev Anand-Baazi-Bollywood Songs-S.D. Burman-club song” Youtube, 3 min 29 sec, 12 Jul 2010.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySdWftpQQHU>



Figure 8: See “Piya Tu Ab Toh Aaja” (Come finally, my love) the exuberant and playful set design –a cage, a slide, a bar and a European café. Source: Sam Bollywood “Piya Tu Ab To Aaja (Revival)- Full Song 1080p-Caravan.”, YouTube, 5 min 26 sec, 12 Jul 2021.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qC4CaOj8FA>

The cabaret of the 50s was very different from that of the 60s. Lack of colour in the former also meant that there was no need to stress on its colourfulness and

stylisation. Though the sets of the 50s were still ornate, the sets of cabaret in the 60s bordered on the fantastical.²⁵ It was also influenced by changing production values as more investment went into the making of the dance performance since it was an important factor in the financial success of the film. By the 2000s, the item number would become an entity in its own right, becoming a lucrative investment on its own. But meanwhile, the cabaret performance of the 50s morphed into a larger-than-life entity in the 60s. In the above scene from the film *Baazi* (1951), the space is relatively bare, the musicians entirely absent. By the 60s, cabaret would come to foreground its musicians, indexing the labour of the art form and mellowing the sensuality of the solo dancing woman.

This sparse aesthetic is witnessed in several such songs, for instance in the film “Aaiye Meherbaan” (mentioned above) or in “Babuji Dheere Chalna”, (tread carefully, my love), from the film *Aar Paar* (1954).²⁶ The set of the space, its expansive emptiness dotted with the audience is designed to give the body room to move, even the outfit, its flowing skirts are designed for movement rather than provocation. “Babuji Dheere Chalna” makes ample use of space through its dance with the body moving stages through the stairs and the shifting spaces of the body as it moves from one scene to the other. The space is the site of dance, and in later films, it will become a more integral part of its choreography, taking on a grander role.

²⁵ ‘Bollywood Vamps and Vixens: Representations of the Negative Women Characters in Bollywood Films’, *Transgressive Womanhood: Investigating Vamps, Witches, Whores, Serial Killers and Monsters*, 2014, 143, https://www.academia.edu/38526084/Bollywood_Vamps_and_Vixens_Representations_of_the_Negative_Women_Characters_in_Bollywood_Films.

²⁶ Bhonsle, “Aaiye Meherbaan”; Geeta Dutt, “Babuji Dheere Chalna”, *Aar Paar* (Shemaroo, 1954), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySdWftpQQHU>.

In “Piya Tu Ab Toh Aaja”, for instance, the set combines several features that are demonstrative of the nightclub’s representation.²⁷ The first of these is the bar and the European style café adjoining it, the first representative of the club space, and the second a metaphor for an ideal city. Then we have the cage and the slide, both of which represent the connotations of desire and play in cabaret, if the cage is a metaphor for restrained desire, the slide adjoining it, is a metaphor for its release, for the ludic potential of desire. In cabaret, this ludic dimension is accentuated, as we will discuss in a later section, this is one of cabaret’s potentialities. These deliberately non-congruous sets are designed keeping in mind the bodily comportment of the dancer, the movement being tied to space, and space becoming part of choreography. In “Piya Tu” for instance, Helen gyrates against the slide, walks through the stage after beginning at the bar. While the first scene establishes her as the creature of urban space, the second marks the seductive performative play inherent in the dance.

But it wasn’t just the sets that became grand; the outfits, sounds and bodily movements also morphed with the new aesthetic, becoming louder—the dressing further accentuating the figure—the sounds becoming denser, faster, inclined to keep up with the vigorous movements of the dance. The emergence of pop music, with its fast, peppy beats and invitation to dance further changed the landscape of cabaret performances, allowing for greater bodily expression. While the change in outfits from the sober possibilities of black and white to the colourful aesthetic of the 60s and 70s indicated a new found grandeur and glamour of the cabaret dancer.

²⁷ Asha Bhonsle and R.D. Burman, "Piya Tu Ab To Aaja", *Caravan* (Saregama, 1971), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qC4CaOj8FA>.

The Modern Girl: Dancer as Urban Public Woman

What remains common to the cabaret dancer even as she moves across various spaces was her urban, modern persona. Despite the fluidity of performance, the cabaret dancer is framed by the nightclub. According to Ranjani Mazumdar, the figure of the vamp situated in the nightclub was a metaphor and site of “urban degradation and disorder...presented through a performance of sexual excess.”²⁸ Thus the moral anxiety around the figure of the vamp is expressed through the projected deviance and terror of the metropolis. In her chapter titled ‘Desiring Women’, she traces the place of the nightclub as the site for expression of female (heterosexual) desire of the vamp on whom the burden of sexual pleasure rests. In songs such as “Aaj ki Raat Aane ko Hai”, (someone is expected tonight), and “Piya tu ab to Aaja”, the stage of the nightclub is presented as part of a city space—its lights, the roads and the buildings in the background.²⁹ The city becomes the setting of the eroticism of the female body.

According to her, In the nightclub, “a combination of desire and anxiety produced an insecurity about female sexuality in the city.”³⁰ Nightclub stands as an allegory for the erotic pleasure of the audience and the transgressive desire of the urban woman. In her analysis of the *film Shree 420*, she argues that this role is played by Nadira who becomes associated with the sinful city of Bombay. Her heightened otherness, constructed through her parodic clothing, the decadent spatiality of the club and the cabaret form became part of a dominant image, highlighting the precarious discourse linking the urban and the sexual in cinema. The nightclub features as a space of erotica, of playful sensuality, by extension giving us impressions of city

²⁸ Mazumdar, ‘Desiring Women’, 89.

²⁹ Asha Bhonsle and R.D. Burman, "Aaj Ki Raat Koi Aane Ko Hai", *Anamika* (Shemaroo, 1973), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySdWftpQQHU>; Bhonsle and Burman, *Piya Tu Ab To Aaja*.

³⁰ Mazumdar, ‘Desiring Women’, 86.

life—its sounds, lights and organisation of space are geared towards this urban sensibility. As Mazumdar suggests, the club is a representative of “the visual condensation of city space.”³¹

Accordingly, as Mazumdar suggests, the vamp was a sign of the many of the anxieties regarding the nature of modernity and the meaning of the modern, in relation to gender, but also in terms of a more generalized anxiety about the nature of modernity itself. According to Prasad, the city in post-independence cinema represented a space of vice and was set in opposition to the village—it was thus both a site of anxiety for the nationalist who traced notions of culture with a capital C back to the village, and also a source of the new developmentalist mode of thought.³² In Mazumdar’s work, the vamp as an urban character is the link between the dichotomy of the good/bad woman and the nationalist resolution. Mazumdar traces the ‘public’ figure of the vamp with reference to the private-public distinction that was purportedly consolidated during the nationalist struggle. This distinction has been critiqued in detail in the previous chapter. To reiterate, it marked the sanctity of the space of the home, and of spiritual values associated with home and hearth against the public behaviour of women which sought to both adapt to the changing circumstances of the working women, and women in public spaces while arguing for the need to retain the traditional value-system. The main concern with this theory is that it assumes that these changes were indelibly linked to the nationalist struggle, ignoring the debates on modernity and women’s own negotiations with it.

³¹ Mazumdar, 86.

³² Madhava Prasad, ‘Realism and Fantasy in Representations of Metropolitan Life in Indian Cinema’, in *City Flicks and the Urban Experience*, ed. Preben Kaarsholm (New Delhi: Seagull Books Pvt.Ltd, 2004), 83–99.

According to Mazumdar, the representation of the female body in this form becomes possible primarily through the evocation of the urban as the place of moral decay. This decadence is then represented through the cabaret number. It is this invasive and repetitive metaphor of the modern, urban, particularly, “desiring woman” to borrow Mazumdar’s term, that is resolved in the mimetic narrative strategies of the melodramatic form of the Hindi film. The nightclub prefigures as a space for the expression of this alternate, transgressive sexuality of the woman.

Space has a variety of meanings. In Mazumdar’s work, it is used to denote the set design, the space in which the cabaret comes to be located. But this space is not merely the physical space, rather it exists at the level of representation. In cinema in particular, it is this representationalism of space that becomes apparent. Cinematic, indeed all, bodies are temporally and spatially situated. As socio-cultural artefacts, they are always in conversation with the environment, but they are not constituted prior to or independent of the environment. Rather it is through its association that they gain meaning, become coherent. The gestures becoming congruous or incongruous to its surroundings, bodies are always bodies in space.

In cinema, the encounter between the body and space in cabaret marks the dancer as a fixture of the nightclub. It is through their collision that bodies and space give each other meaning. Corporealizing space also brings our attention to the relationship of effect that bodies have over spaces, the movements, the gestures and actions of the body shape space and are in turn shaped by it. At the level of representation, the space becomes metaphor and the bodies express the characteristics of the space through their attire and mannerisms. While the cabaret dancer by extension becomes part of the city nightscape in cinema, the club itself is often a place of fantasy—its elaborate sets are designed to give us the impression of the club as a

space of fantasy, and the cabaret dancer becomes the embodiment of this fantasy. The nightclub in its terminology is associated with the *Raat* and *Jawani*, (Night and Youth), the time for all that is clandestine and sensual during the age which represents sensuality and fun. This invitation to the pleasures of the night renders the cabaret body more evocative of the possible joys of modernity than the representation of a moral crisis.

According to Paul Chatterton and Robert Holland, the nightclub is an “urban playscape.”³³ Though their work is concerned with the aspects of production, regulation and consumption which govern the space of the nightclub in the economy of urban leisure, the concept of playscape can be appropriated and extended to understand the cabaret as a form of ‘playscape’; what Mazumdar calls the “gaudy decadence” of the nightclubs from the 60s onwards, is in many ways also a place of performative potential. In this sense, the cabaret holds out possibilities for the ludic subversion of the sartorial, choreographic, spatial and musical order of the film. Its use of the ‘western’, its ‘foreignness’ also indicates an aural and visual fluidity that transgresses the limited representations offered by the film.

The nightclub as playscape defines a site wherein the normal rules of conduct that govern the narrative no longer apply. Populated by the cabaret dancer and the criminal, the nightclub is the space of the ‘other’—the non-hero and non-heroine, its status as other also gives it room to experiment with cinematic conventions. In its exaggerated sets, hybrid form, cabaret holds out the possibilities of subversive play. We need to regard the cabaret as more than merely expression of sexuality, since the

³³ Paul Chatterton and Robert Hollands, ‘Theorising Urban Playscapes: Producing, Regulating and Consuming Youthful Nightlife City Spaces’, *Urban Studies* 39, no. 1 (2002): 95–116, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43196748>.

cabaret is also a symbol of the global interchanges—in its music, dress and choreography and particularly as it is situated in the playscape of the nightclub, the cabaret is also a demonstration of not only the dangers of modernity, but also its pleasures.

Cabaret as Playscape

Cabaret is part of an urban sensorium, the virtual on-screen nightclub, and much like the non-diegetic club, it is a playscape where its masquerading of sexuality, its simulation, its performative nature becomes obvious, unlike the performances of the heroine which are often apparently earnest demonstrations of love or desire. “Ang Lag Jaa Balma”, (Hold my body, love), for instance, is an erotic invitation with little pretence, rescued by the bodily comportment of the actress Padmini.³⁴ The performance of the cabaret dancer is set as a masquerade and this undercuts the potency of sexual desire that is now distilled in the figure of the cabaret dancer who becomes an embodiment for the forces of modernity and its encounters with womanhood. Its elaborate outfits and garish colours blend into its ludic aesthetics and its playful side of sexuality—the masquerading, the new avatars and the geo-visual globality are all part of modernity, as play shrouded in the veil of danger and decadence. In this sense, we can complicate the binary of tradition and modernity that we discussed earlier. As we can see, modernity did not simply map onto the body of the woman as an issue of morality; instead, the modernity of the cabaret dancer evokes new questions on the nature of modernity in Hindi cinema, not only as threat but also containing its own pleasures and transgressions.

³⁴ Asha Bhonsle, “Ang Lag Jaa Balma” *Mera Naam Joker* (Saregama, 1970), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxLaC42BQVM>.

Cabaret is a form of unstructured performance. There is no fixity of outfits, rhythms, dance moves; what is foregrounded is the female performance, the female body. The choreographic moves often revolve around shimmying, further foregrounding the erotic potential of the female body movement. This gives the dancer greater freedom to enhance her erotic appeal through a variety of outfits and the free play of dance moves. The cabaret dancer's performance is an expression of her bodily autonomy—the freestyle of the dance is an expressing and mirroring her sexual freedom. It draws its form from varied cultural heritages featuring everything from flamenco, belly dancing, can-can and burlesque.³⁵

Though there are often comments on the Anglo-Indian or foreign ancestry of dancers such as Cuckoo Moray, Faryal and Helen, one need also remember that in terms of the grammar of movement, many of the cabaret dancers also come from a background of Indian dances - furthering their complex relation with the idea of 'westernised dancer' bodies; their dance repertoires contains the inflection of both regional and global forms of dance.³⁶ Helen, for instance, was trained by PL Raj in Kathak, Bharatnatyam and had also learnt forms such as Manipuri dance.³⁷ Her dance repertoire consists of the range of mujra in "Hum Tumhare Hai" (I belong to you), "Tora Mann Bada Paapi", (your mind is a sinner), and the flamenco moves in "Huzurewala Jo Ho Ijaazat" (if you permit me, dear), and the belly dancing shimmy

³⁵ Cabaret, as we will see later is burlesque in two senses of the term, for one, it is an erotic performance, sometimes including a strip-tease, secondly, it often parodies male desire and through its exaggerated gestures reveals the artificiality of female erotic body.

³⁶ Though almost no work on cabaret passes without a mention of the vamp's westernisation and demonized modernity, these inflections tell us that a reading of form and style can reveal elements alternative to biographical readings.

³⁷ Madhurima Guha, 'Main Gudd Ki Dali: Helen the "Golden Girl"', n.d., 43.

shake for which she was known in many of her songs.³⁸ Padma Khanna too was trained in kathak, while actors such as Bindu and Aruna Irani built a reputation for cabaret without any training in dance.³⁹ Thus, there is a fluidity to the performance of the cabaret dancer's bodies, and the inflections of her movement that are not easily captured with reference to her identity.

In many of the cabaret numbers, what comes across is not just the eroticism, but the playfulness of the medium—its light hearted approach to life, its lyrics which speak of desire but also about life—of the allures and dangers of love, and the world such as “Duniya Mein”, (In this world) “Zindagi Ittefaq Hai”, (Life is a co-incidence) “Babuji Dheere Chalna”, “Tadbeer Se” (With a plan), “Jeene Do Aur Jiyo” (Live and let live) and so on.⁴⁰ In “Jeene Do Aur Jiyo”, Asha Bhonsle sings:

Jeene do aur jiyo
Chadti jawani ke din hai
Yeh sama milega kahan
Yahin zindagani ke din hai
marna toh sabko hai ji ke bhi dekh le,
*chahat ko ek dum pi ke bhi dekh le*⁴¹

³⁸ Asha Bhonsle and Sudha Malhotra, "Hum Tumhare Hain", *Chalti Ka Naam Gaadi* (Shemaroo, 1958), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=of0NHpy3t2k>; Asha Bhonsle, *Tora Mann Bada Paapi*, Gunga Jumna (Saregama, 1961), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_Zxh7-nFKQ; Asha Bhonsle and Minoo Purushottam, "Huzurewala Jo Ho Ijaazat To", *Yeh Raat Phir Na Aayegi* (Saregama, 1966), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6ym4uOOtEo>.

³⁹ 'Our Guru - Mrs. Padma Khanna Sidana - Indianica Academy | Kathak Dance', *Indianica Academy* (blog), accessed 11 May 2022, <https://www.indianicaacademy.com/about/our-guru/>; 'Bindu (Actress)', in *Wikipedia*, 3 May 2022,

[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Bindu_\(actress\)&oldid=1085906267](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Bindu_(actress)&oldid=1085906267); 'Aruna Irani', in *Wikipedia*, 12 April 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Aruna_Irani&oldid=1082380109.

⁴⁰ Asha Bhonsle and R.D. Burman, "Duniya Mein Logon Ko", *Apna Desh* (Saregama, 1972), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUpihj_7Cmk&list=PLp_kieJqh1nisvQTkjFRaMmFDw_Foi3hG&index=4; Asha Bhonsle and Mahendra Kapoor, "Zindagi Ittefaq Hai", *Aadmi Aur Insaan* (Saregama, 1969),

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUpihj_7Cmk&list=PLp_kieJqh1nisvQTkjFRaMmFDw_Foi3hG&index=4; Dutt, "Babuji Dheere Chalna"; Geeta Dutt, "Tadbeer Se", *Baazi* (Shemaroo, 1951), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgwfvdh7cPc>; Asha Bhonsle, "Jeene Do Aur Jiyo", *Taxi Driver* (Shemaroo, 1954), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iq7WoJ6wbic>.

⁴¹ Bhonsle, "Jeene Do Aur Jiyo."

*Live and let live
 These are the days of youth
 When would you find this time?
 These are the days of life
 Everyone must die, live a little
 Sip on the cup of desire a little*

Composed by SD Burman and picturised on Sheila Ramani, this song from *Taxi Driver* (1954) fits into the gaiety of the cabaret sequence, which even when expressing danger—this sequence, for instance, ends with a confrontation between the villain and the hero— in its bodily movements and musical rhythms becomes an expression of fun. The soundscape of the cabaret is an extension of the nightclub playscape. Its fast-paced rhythms, blend of Indian and western instruments, of modern pop sounds with the soulfulness of melody, mixed with the ample use of the drum and the trumpet—which came to signal the presence and performance of the cabaret dancer—is indicative of its playful irreverence for structures. This lack of structural unity in the cabaret sequence can be framed as the gateway to its possibilities—to its constant adaptability to both the local and the global, to a playfulness of sensuality and the performative dimensions of the female body.



Figure 9: Helen in her flamenco attire flanked by performing artists. Her bodily movements, the camera composition showing the dancers—another common shot—the dancer is framed by both her performativity and her desirability. Source: Shemaroo Filmi Gaane, “Huzurewala Jo Ho Ijaazat Ho-Yeh Raat Phir Na Aayegi Songs-Helen-Biswajeet-Dance-Filmigaane”, Youtube, 5 min 11 sec, 14 April 2016.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUpihj_7Cmk&list=PLp_kieJqh1nsvQTkjFRaMmFDw_Foi3hG&index=4

Another crucial aspect of this playscape was its hybridity. In the O.P. Nayyar song, “Huzurewala Jo Ho Ijaazaat”, Helen and Madhumati perform to the tunes of flamenco, dressed in its outfits, glittering and shimmying. The open stage side-lined with the musicians gives ample room for dance. The flamenco attire, the use of claps as musical instrument and several of its dance steps all remind one of the ‘western dance form’ while the tunes and rhythms even its language and lyrics remind the listener of its indigenusness. Further, the sequence also foregrounds the musicians who are themselves manifestations of this globality. The music also adds to the authenticity of the flamenco performance with its Spanish guitar and claps, standing in contrast to the lyrics and the often-interspersed rhythms of the tabla. The foregrounding of the musician against Helen’s body reminds us that the form of the cabaret is more than just its eroticism; it undercuts the eroticism to demonstrate the

simulation of the performance. The choreography, dress and music blend the Spanish flamenco form with regional inflections.

The screened body of the cabaret dancer, thus, was not simply western or modern. More than that, it was exotic and fluid, capable of many different forms of musical, choreographic and sartorial expression within the nightclub space.⁴² It even existed outside of the space of the nightclub in the villain's lair or bedroom. The cabaret is still distinguishable through its combination of dance moves, attire and music—though not by any single such element. The hybridity of the cabaret sequence brings us closer to Anutsup Basu's concept of the "geo-visual body", one which embodies the "transmission of sights and sounds between cultures, across global distances."⁴³

While his remarks pertain specifically to Helen, they can be extended to the cabaret dance itself as a geo-visual form. The cabaret in its masquerades, its play with various global identities and appearances challenges the geographic boundaries of cinema. Beyond its apparent representations of the nation, the body of the cabaret dancer and the music of cabaret represents a hybrid global aesthetic. Further, even the audience represents a global, urban sensibility—scenes of foreigners, men dressed in formal attire and ample shots of drinking and smoking. Its fluid modernity is evident from the sheer variety of costumes and languages that populate this period— from Telugu in "Bathamma Eka Boto Ra" to words of English in songs like "O Meri Baby

⁴² Songs such as "Mai Abhi Kamsin Hoon", "Mungda" and "Meri Shaadi Kab Hogi" indicate this other fluid side of cabaret through their outfits and lyrics. In mai abhi Helen wears what looks like a Sari cut to the thigh. In "Meri Shaadi Kab Hogi", Jayshree is styled as an Indian goddess, even her bodily moves correspond briefly with Indian classical forms.

⁴³ Basu, 'Face That Launched a Thousand Ships: Helen and Public Femininity in Hindi Film', 146.

Doll”, “Night Is Lovely Dark And Cool”, or even entirely English songs such as “Listen To The Pouring Rain” and “A Beautiful Baby Of Broadway”.⁴⁴

It is this infidelity to form and their drawing on global and regional aesthetics that makes cabaret a bricolage—building its own local cinematic language from global and local elements. Beyond the influences and representations of the global and the national in cabaret, attention should be given to the bricolage character of this phenomenon. It is a pastiche of various elements that come together, not seamlessly, but coherently. The cabaret song, with its variety of dress, sound, its lack of structural fidelity to any genre of music, dance or attire juxtaposes disparate elements to form an affective text.

⁴⁴ Mohammed Rafi and Sharda, "Bathamma Ekad Boto Ra", *Shatranj* (Saregama, 1969), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAJ4asMYepc&t=208s>; Mohammed Rafi, O Meri Baby Doll, *Ek Phool Char Kante* (Nupur Audio, 1960), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Koa0zkkOtjA>; Asha Bhonsle, "Night Is Lovely, Dark and Cool", *Pyar Ka Sapna*, 1969, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MThhQCX3BiU>; Uthup, "Listen to the Pouring Rain"; Singh, "Beautiful Baby of Broadway".



Figure 10: The westernised dancer. Ultra Bollywood “Aa Jane Jaan- Helen-Lata Mangeshkar, Intaquam Song”, YouTube, 6 min 20 sec, 9 Sept 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMueQrVqFBE>

This playfulness is also part of the ‘westernised’ image of the cabaret dancer. Though much has been said about this image—the blond wig, blue eyes and the cigarette in a holder, or a drink in the hand, all indicators of a decadent influence; its exaggerated makeup, the beehive wig, rhinestone eyebrows and the feathered hair all indicate an irreverence for codes of sexuality expressed in the subtle gestures of the female protagonist and bring to visibility the instability of the sign of the female body. Cabaret thus displays the ludic fluidity of the female body. As its performativity is foregrounded, the voyeuristic potential of the erotic image is undercut by these exaggerated motions and appearances. Cabaret mixes the erotic and its disavowal within the same frame, the dresses being one example of the play with voyeurism. As mentioned above, while being extremely revealing, the dresses also conceal the body

through the stockings and body suits.⁴⁵ The body of the westernised other, the dancer is part of a deliberate act rather than being naturalised. The elaborate outfits, the loud makeup and the evidently false portrayals of the woman become parodies blended into the decadent aesthetics of the period.

Part of its play is its play with desire, whether male heterosexual desire or female desire. Seduction is set within this playfulness—everything is simulated, is a performance, is set in the playscape of the nightclub. We will look more closely on the cabaret as a form, beginning with its ludic and parodic portrayal of male desire, we will also explore how it engages what can be called the micro-narrative of desire—producing small units which narrate tales of love, longing and intrigue.

Section II: Micronarratives of desire

Mocking Male Desire

In “Aa Jaane Jaan”, (come, my love), one of very few cabaret songs sung by Lata Mangeshkar, the scene begins with the play of light on a wall, a display of cabaret’s love for technological marvel, before a number of black-faced men arrive with a cage supported by the sounds of a trumpet. In the cage is locked another black-faced man, despite the obvious colonial reference and racism, or perhaps because of it, the song also shows us the unrestrained and often threatening male desire, framing his eyes and face before the introduction of the cabaret dancer, forcing us to acknowledge the voyeur as threat.⁴⁶ The scene next frames the face of Helen, her direct gaze countering the caged gaze of the male—his sexuality is subdued and captured. Helen walks down

⁴⁵ Anna Morcom, *Hindi Film Songs and The Cinema*.

⁴⁶ Lata Mangeshkar, *Aa Jaane Jaan*, Intaquam (Saregama, 1969), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMueQRVqFBE>.

a stairway to be met by chorus musicians, her body undulating. Helen wears rhinestones over her eyelashes and eyebrows bringing the attention of the viewer to her face, her blond wig, ensconced by jewellery and her revealed waist becomes the focal point of her movements. She is then framed by these men who bow before her potent sexuality—expressed through a series of vivacious jumps. Her hands move slowly from her legs towards her waist and suddenly we encounter her face again. Her fetishized body, its parts moving before the caged man excite and inflame him, another symbol of male impotency before her threatening sensuality.

This entire sequence is enacted in the background of a glorious chorus music designed to frame her movements, each move matching the accompanying sound. While the camera frames her in a frontal shot, she begins to sing “*aa jaane jaa, mera yeh husn jawan, tere liye hai aas lageye o jaleem aa jaa na*” (Come my dear, my youth is blooming, and yearns for you, do not torture me so, come). The song binds both her expressions on her own body as well as an invitation to the male. In a later section, we will discuss in greater detail these varying enunciations of desire. These lines are shot as the camera gazes at her and she gazes back establishing a direct gaze with the spectator and ends with her writhing on the floor expressing her active desire as she lies before the cage. The sequence makes ample use of the space and the camera, both constantly in motion in their attempt to capture her body, the drums and the trumpet accompanying her vigorous movements.

In the cabaret sequence, this movement follows the movements of the body—her dance disrupting not only the chain of causality in the narrative, but also the visual order of the film itself. She is surrounded by viewers—the caged men, the horny man of the audience and the smattering of Caucasians. As discussed above, the presence of the audience in the cabaret sequence is a demonstration of the publicness of the

female body, but being presented as performance, it also dismantles the voyeuristic gaze. Her performance is executed to the accompaniment of these black-faced men, their whips becoming an accessory to the performance. Towards the end of the song, the caged man is released and follows the dancer as he tries to capture her in his arms and she escapes. He is then restrained. This entire sequence indicates to us the impotency of male desire, his thwarted attempts meet her distant seduction. The final segment refers back to the first segment of the song—now we move from the slow and powerful sound of the trumpet to the rapid beats of the drums framing the climax in which we return once again to the closeup of the men on stage, their faces contorted with desperate lust, once again this image is juxtaposed against the horny man in the audience. The entire sequence is a commentary on male heterosexual desire.

In “Kar Le Pyar” (come, engage in love), a pair of legs dressed in pink fishnet stockings sway about the dance floor.⁴⁷ In this first scene, the stockings, which stand out against the black background, become part of a teasing eroticism, one which reveals as well as conceals. The next shot we see a dancer in the dark, a hint of the instruments behind her. She is dressed in a glittering bikini, on her head, a crown of feathers and behind her follows a tail, all in red, a preferred colour in the cabaret sequence. Her makeup is loud, her hair in a short blond bob and her round, glittering, red earrings hang to her shoulders. She begins by rhythmically humming a tune as she strolls through the crowds—a hum that is almost like a moan, in search of someone. Soon the trumpet follows as she teases the men on the floor, traversing the masculine space of the club, greeting one and asking to sit on another’s lap. There is a closeup of

⁴⁷ Asha Bhonsle, “Kar Le Pyar”, *Talaash* (HMV, 1969), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_GV9MPuj80.

a gleeful old man and his disgusted wife, she sits on his lap, takes his kerchief and wipes his face in a comic move.

This shows us the laughability of male heterosexual desire, which is open to mockery in the cabaret sequence, which can be exaggerated, made fun of, made criminal and lustful in a disgusting manner, as she reaches the hero she asks if he is alone, then laughs and begins to sing as though whispering into his ear—*kar le pyar kar le, ki din hai yahin, par chori se lekin koi dekhe na kahin*. (come, engage in love, for now is the time; but stealthily lest anyone sees us) Her erotic performance is interrupted by long musical interludes of the accompanying dancers. Apart from its echoes with the invitation to fun and frolic that we see in songs such as “Jeene Do Aur Jiyo”, this song also captures another frequently featured theme of the cabaret sequence: its encounters with male desire.

In the above sequences, we see that male desire is often parodied, the cabaret becomes a subversive space where the ordinarily voyeuristic gaze of the male and his desire is mocked at. In another song, “Husn Ke Lakhon Rang”, Padma Khanna plays the role of the unattainable seductress; her red skirt, so far, a symbol of a fiery sensuality is transformed into a muleta with which she provokes Premnath, who charges at her like a bull.⁴⁸ Her seduction is a ruse, she wards off male desire, and her enactment of lust is pretence. This mockery of male heterosexual desire and pretence of female seduction is present in several other songs. For instance, if we take the song *How Sweet Dadaji* the man is an older figure and through this displacement of the desiring male body with an old body, the song questions the codes of desire for masculinity.

⁴⁸ Bhonsle, “Husn Ke Lakhon Rang”.

In the song “Aaja O Mere Raja” (come, my king), Mumtaz extends an invitation to the man, only as a means to fool him.⁴⁹ Often, the cabaret songs mix beckoning with a playful parody. Throughout the song, her choreography mingles invitation with distancing. The dancer plays with coyness and seduction through her movements. At a certain point in the song, her face is framed through the windows, making her inaccessible to the viewer. In another scene, she removes the man’s spectacles, blinding him. This metaphoric expression of the blinding of male desire, and male voyeurism, though made explicit in this sequence, is not unique to it. The cabaret sequence, in this sense, is not merely invitation but also a site for a critical engagement with heterosexual male desire.

If this section captures the coy and distant choreography of the dancer, in the next section, we explore the musical and choreographic elements which capture her seductiveness.

⁴⁹ Asha Bhonsle, “Aaja O Mere Raja”, *Apna Desh* (Saregama, 1972), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h087TOfqoY>.



Figure 11: “Aaja O Mere Raja” from *Apna Desh*. The dancer draws attention to her body and then shuns it away. The song uses teasing humour as strategy to subvert male voyeurism.

Simulated Seduction of Cabaret: The Erotic ‘Musical Body’

Much has been said about the cabaret dancer’s gaze towards the camera. To summarize briefly, it is argued that due to the direct address, i.e., the gaze of the dancer at the camera, the cabaret sequence also subverts the male gaze. In our exposition on song and narrative, we discussed Usha Iyer’s and Claudia Gorbman’s concept of the “production number”.⁵⁰ The production number, which is a dance sequence often independent of the narrative “is marked by a mode of looking where the performer explicitly invites and often returns the gaze of the internal as well as external audience, and is thus overtly coded as a performance.”⁵¹ Laura Mulvey argues that the song and dance sequence “breaks the diegesis.”⁵² Giving the example of the showgirl she hypothesizes that in these sequences “the powerful look of the

⁵⁰ Iyer, ‘Film Dance, Female Stardom, and the Production of Gender in Popular Hindi Cinema’; Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*.

⁵¹ Iyer, ‘Film Dance, Female Stardom, and the Production of Gender in Popular Hindi Cinema’, 125.

⁵² Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema | SpringerLink’, 812.

male protagonist is broken in favour of an image in direct erotic rapport with the spectator.”⁵³ In many of the analyses on the gaze and the cabaret dancer, it has been argued that the frontal gaze dismantles the voyeuristic component of the dance sequence.⁵⁴

In the Hindi film, this frontal address is common. It is a sequence where the dancer or actor is facing the camera and is seemingly performing, for that brief second, for the audience beyond the screen. This is not the same as the breach of the fourth wall: the moment when a character directly addresses the audience. Thus, the frontal gaze refers specifically to the overt acknowledgment of an audience beyond the screen, without an address, unlike the breach of the fourth wall. In the cabaret, the male gaze is not of solely the spectators on the screen and often the male accompaniment to the dancer, but also the audience. The accompanying dancer channels the desire of the non-diegetic audience by cavorting with the woman.

The concept that the frontal gaze is an authoritative gaze of the on-screen body and that it shatters the authority of the male gaze is premised on the idea that the illusion of cinema is brought to one’s attention. This concept is based on two primary flaws: one, that the gaze of the audience is the subject of a passive, uniform gaze, not bringing to bear its own experiences to cinema.⁵⁵ Further, it assumes that the actor’s looking into the camera while performing is the reinstatement of her power. This is like the address in a play where performance is often directed frontally at the audience, a legacy from the theatre-influenced film form. It could just as easily be argued that this further strengthens the illusion, her looking at the audience is not a

⁵³ Laura Mulvey, 812.

⁵⁴ Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film*, 99; Mazumdar, ‘Desiring Women’, 102.

turning away from eroticism but it invites the audience to look—she is looking at you and dancing for you. The singer or dancer performing on stage summons the audience to watch her—the on-screen audience as well as the viewer. It presents itself before the meta-audience of the theatre through the diversion of the diegetic audience's gaze.

The excessive attention paid to the visual gaze limits our study of the voice, space and various other elements of the text that are part of its meaning. As previous chapters have indicated, this limits our view of film as a visual medium alone. Ignoring the interaction between the various elements, the multisensory experience of the song-- felt through the senses, but also as an emotion-- as well as the changing evolution of the form, neglects their impact on the representation of women, their bodies, voices, performances and framing. Beyond the gaze of the camera lies the self-fashioning of the cabaret dancer as she displays sexuality on her body and through her performance. To redefine the cabaret sequence means bringing attention to the performativity of desire, to the many movements and musical rhythms that enable the simulation of seduction.

Apart from the frontal address, i.e., of the dancer's face, the cabaret song also indulges in several closeups of the body. It is perhaps the most common shot in a dance song, along with the tracking shot which situates the body in space. The closeup frees it from reference to space. It is read variously as fetishization of the body, and as resistance— since the closeup forces confrontation with the object, subjectivises it. According to Erin Brannigan, the close-ups are a form of micro-choreography, as a moment of suspension from the context of the song into pure expression.⁵⁶ Even as the dancing body is prefigured in space, it also fragments space

⁵⁶ Brannigan, *Dancefilm*.

and time, the rhythms of the song shaping the precision of time rather than being shaped by any linear or temporal relation with the narrative. The song-dance sequences, accommodated within the narrative are also instances of absolute expressivity in their individual shots.⁵⁷ To regard the body within cinema, the screened body or the cinematic body, is to capture this dimension of the affectivity of the body, of its expressive dimensions, of how the body on screen interacts with space, sound to produce an affect; to produce a grammar of the song-dance sequence. These movements of invitations and sounds of pleasure are the micro-choreographies of seduction. In this section, we will explore how these choreographies narrate the female body, how the sounds and instruments play into this choreography to constitute the ‘musical body’.



Figure 12: Helen in “Meri Jawani Pyar Ko Tarse”. The closeups were not afraid of depicting the forbidden parts of the body.

⁵⁷ Brannigan.

In the song “Meri Jawani Pyar Ko Tarse” (My youth yearns for love), Helen begins with a private scene of her in a bath, decorated with pink lights, before an audience.⁵⁸ She moves to another private scene of her in the bedroom, the song is a song of her longing for a lover, she searches the audience for the signs of a paramour and finds only couples. The song thus transitions seamlessly between the private world of the dancer and her ‘public’ body. Referring to an unknown lover, embodied by the male statue on stage, throughout the song Helen moves her hands across the statue’s body, sometimes referring to her own beauty, sometimes calling for a paramour. The song also has long musical interludes that are simply expressions of the dancer’s fast movements. She writhes across the floor, inching closer to the statue, and her open mouth enunciates each word of the lyrics as the camera zooms in on her face.

If the previous section discussed the parodying of male desire in the cabaret sequence; in these sequences, the woman embodies desire, and her enactment of seduction is part of this performance of desire. More than her simulated expression of desire though, is her expression of seduction. Her open mouth, wildly flying thighs, her figure slithering on the floor while the camera zooms in and out from parts of her body to her entire seductive form are all expressions of an uncontrollable sensuality, further enhanced by the pacing beats. The movements and sounds of the cabaret animate the desirability of the female body, as much as they display her own desire. This is nowhere more visible than in the song “Yeh Kahan Aa Gayee Main” (Where have I come?), the song which begins with her moving through the audience and

⁵⁸ Asha Bhonsle, “Meri Jawani Pyaar Ko Tarse”, *Upaasna* (Saregama, 1971), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gCxmtJJh8kQ>.

concludes with a two-minute solo composed purely of movement and the drums, she strips to wordless music, rolls around the floor while the singer moans in the background.⁵⁹ Her loud sighs mix with the ever-escalating solo of the drums until the song ends with a crescendo of music and climax of the dance, the next shot is of her face at rest, exhausted by her movements. The song is a clear reference to sex, her final image not unlike the image of a woman in an orgasmic state.

The cabaret dancer's sexuality is distinguished by the bodily movements, sounds and sometimes the lyrics. The outfits generally accentuate the waist and are often cut out to display various parts of the body. The outfits also borrow from other cultures that foreground erotic female performance. The cabaret dance accentuates the female body, the shimmy shakes and movements of the framing of the body through the camera and the dancer's own movements—the face, the legs and the waist all bring our attention to the “micro-choreographies” of sensuality. Rearticulating sexuality as a series of sensations, of affective flows, we can think of cabaret as the language of sensuality, as Chatterjee has suggested, the cabaret dancer carried “an entire film's load of sensuality.”⁶⁰ Its lyrics, sounds, movement and cinematography are geared towards roles of femininity designed to rouse feelings.

As Pinto notes:

Most of the vamp dances used a certain repertoire of sexual gestures, from coyness (her hands splayed and folded over the crotch) to self-appreciation (stroking arms or hips), to simulated stimulation (hands in hair, at lips, near breasts)⁶¹

⁵⁹ Asha Bhonsle, “Yeh Kahan Aa Gayee Main”, *Shaque* (Shemaroo, 1976), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h31fKNRClrU>.

⁶⁰ Partha Chatterjee, ‘A Bit of Song and Dance’, in *Frames of Mind: Reflections on Indian Cinema*, ed. Aruna Vasudev (New Delhi: UBS Publishers’ Distributors, Ltd., 1995), 214.

⁶¹ Pinto, *Helen*, 112–13.

Her body is displayed sometimes writhing, running her fingers through its contours, with special attention paid to the waist, which is also often highlighted through the outfits which leave it bare, her dance may or may not include stripping such as (“Yeh Kahan Aa Gayi Main”, “Aaj Raat Hai Jawan”(the night is young), or the most popular of such sequences—“Husn Ke Lakhon Rang”). There are abundant movements which draw our attention to her hips, her bosom and her waist. Her dance a mix of feminine “coyness” and bold invitation.⁶² The camera looks down on her as she slides across the floor, and looks right at her as she mouths the lyrics inviting the sexual gaze. This is a crucial distinction between voyeurism and the sexual gaze of the cabaret—while voyeurism, necessarily involves “seeing without being seen”, the cabaret dance is designed to be seen and the dancer frames her body and her face inviting the gaze of the audience. The body movements draw our attention back to the cabaret dancer’s body, she points to herself—framing different parts of her body with her hands.

In the song, the cohesion of movement and rhythm become pure expressions of sensuality. As Mazumdar has commented “rhythmic combination of sound and body...evokes a hyper-real world of desire.”⁶³ The ‘musical body’, a body composed of both sound and movement, becomes the site of expression of desire.

The musical body is a body that is animated by the screen and establishes a visceral relation with the audience and with the music. The body carries the sensations of the rhythm and expresses sounds through movement. All dancing bodies are in some form musical bodies in as much as they move in sync with or incongruous to the music presented to it. In the juxtaposition of lyrics and enactment, the musical body

⁶² Mazumdar, ‘Desiring Women’, 88.

⁶³ Mazumdar, *Bombay Cinema*, 88.

narrativizes song establishing an affective relation between the sound, image and the audience. It captures the sensations of sound as image and body. This body of sensation and expression is what we could consider part of the reciprocity of sound and movement on screen.

In the cabaret sequence, often the drums in particular become the agents of seduction—the drums, with their fast-pace and their loud, crashing sounds, complements the body of the dancer perfectly in its enthusiastic passion. In the song, “Zindagi Ittefaq Hai”, for instance, Mumtaz performs the twist to the quickening pace of the drums, in the next scene, we see just her feet in movement, her hands guide the camera as she runs them across her body, until finally her face is visible.⁶⁴ She moves her head from side to side—her hair flying in all directions—before ending with a sigh. In this sequence, we see clearly the conjunction of the beat and the choreography. Her body trembles with the same speed and intensity and her desire is manifest in the rapid, trembling urgency of the drum and body cohesion. Often, the fragmented shots of her body—her legs, her waist in movement are shown to us, drawing our attention not only to the parts of her body, but the animation of her sensuality through movement. These shots are what one could consider the micro-choreography of seduction. This is also extended to the musical aspects of the song the moans and sighs that are often part of the cabaret song are extremely sensual expressions—they vocalise female desire. The cabaret is a cinematic space for the visibility and audibility of female desire which is otherwise unavailable to the cinema going audience. The cabaret is a site where female eroticism is both heard and seen.

⁶⁴ Bhonsle and Kapoor, “Zindagi Ittefaq Hai”.

To understand this, one could contrast the dance performances of Helen with the cabaret number performed by Vyjantimala in *Sangam*. Distinct in many ways from the cabaret is understand it and as we too have defined it, “Main Kaa Karoon Ram” (what do I do, my lord), demonstrates a relatively de-eroticised body of the cabaret dancer.⁶⁵ Vyjantimala, known for her classical performances, has only performed cabaret in this one song. Even within the song, Vyjantimala is clad in all black, and despite the grandeur of the cabaret dress—complete with her playful adorning of the lampshade as a hat—her bodily contours are hidden from us by black stocking and a dress with no cut-outs. Apart from this dress, she also dresses in a white shirt and pant in the beginning of the video, changing into a black shirt towards the end. Her sombre attire is in contrast with the gaudy costumes of the cabaret dancer. This sequence demonstrates difference between the so-called masala and low culture of cabaret, and this refined dance performance by a popular classical dancer. She performs the twist, which includes no shimmying or pointing to one’s own body. The music is sombre and melodious—lacking the ‘western’ beats that characterise the cabaret. Further, the camera, though it fragments her body parts, never comes too close. Her song, which is performed before her husband, is another way in which it is distinct in its eroticism from other cabaret numbers which are often performed for an unknown lover. Through the contrast of most standard cabaret numbers with this particular performance, one can construct a sense of the components that compose the cabaret.

One could consider three enunciations of desire in cabaret. Though they often overlap with one another, they also give clues to the varying registers of desire and

⁶⁵ Lata Mangeshkar, “Main Kaa Karoon Ram”, *Sangam* (Shemaroo, 1964), [maihttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h31fKNRClrU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h31fKNRClrU).

seduction in the Hindi film as they juxtapose the voice and the body. The first of these is the desire for the other—either directed at a specific man in the audience, or a diffused desire that permeates through the audience on screen. The songs are often songs of love and longing, such as the song “Meri Jawani Pyar Ko Tarse” discussed above, or “Kahan Hai Woh Deewana”(where is that lover), and “O Haseena Zulfonwali”, (my love with lustrous hair).⁶⁶ The second enunciation is that of self-referentiality, where through the movements as well as the lyrics, the dancer refers to her own beauty, her own body. These frame her as a desirable body, her self-objectification is a clue, not of female fetishization, but of invitation. The final, and rather rare sequence is that of male commentary on the female body—from the songs mentioned above such as “Patli Kamar Hai” and “Qamar Patli”, to songs such as “O Haseena Zulfonwali” which is closer to a duet.⁶⁷ This disjunction between the female body who does not speak, and the male voice which comments on her desirability with reference to her body is perhaps the closest to a fetishized appropriation of the female body through, not only the gaze, but the voice of the male. The song, “O Haseena Zulfonwali” demonstrates all of these elements. It refers to her body, to her desire as well as the male commentary on her body. In fact, one could consider it the ideal cabaret number—from its dance movements, its fantastical outfits, exaggerated sets and catchy pop music, the song exemplifies the gaiety and seduction of the cabaret number.

⁶⁶ Bhonsle, "Meri Jawani Pyaar Ko Tarse"; Asha Bhonsle, "Kahan Hai Woh Deewana", *Loafer* (Saregama, 1973), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaaQCokPXcY>; Asha Bhonsle and Mohammed Rafi, "O Haseena Zulfon Wali", *Teesri Manzil* (Saregama, 1966), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaTyirMKOBw>.

⁶⁷ Kumar, "Patli Kamaar Hai, Teerzchi Nazaar Hai"; Mahendra Kapoor, "Qamar Patli, Nazar Bijli", *Kahin Din Kahin Raat* (Shemaroo, 1968), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_e7pyGjgFJk; Bhonsle and Rafi, "O Haseena Zulfonwali."

The cabaret song in the Hindi film, thus expresses a manifold image of desire, what the author terms the ‘micro-narrative of desire’. As this chapter has attempted to demonstrate the song’s micro-narrative composition was part of the playscape of modernity exemplified by the cabaret performance. The cabaret stood out as an emotive, visceral field of desire within the otherwise repressed cinematic narrative. Its bodies, sounds and spaces led us to new pathways in which modernity was reimagined through the pastiche of the global, local and the surreal. Its important place in the landscape of desire was negotiated with as new sounds and bodies came to replace the cabaret. The 80s, often ignored in our analysis of Hindi cinema, opens up fresh conversations on modern, urban life as the playscape faded as a distinct space and became an expansive field within which the new narrative was performed. In the following chapter, we will look closely at the articulations made possible in the films and songs of this period.

New Sounds, New Bodies after Cabaret

The New Heroine

With the 80s, there was a shift in the aesthetics of sexuality with the emergence of actors such as Parveen Babi and Zeenat Aman. Aman, for instance, was touted as the first ‘modern’ heroine.⁶⁸ In the third chapter, we looked at the description of Helen as “scintillating”, “sexy” and “sizzling”, these words, which were reserved for the cabaret dancer, came to be applied to the main lead. While there is work on the discontinuous continuity of the eroticism of the cabaret embodied by Zeenat Aman and Parveen Babi, this chapter asserts that it is important to regard the crucial differences between the two, the cabaret dancer and the new heroine in terms of the emerging representations of the musical bodies of the 70s and 80s. If the cabaret dancer’s body characterises the free-flowing playscape of seduction, unattached to any object, the new heroine finds herself embedded into the romantic narrative, redrawing the limits of female desire in cinema.

With the new crop of actors, the cabaret performance no longer remained an intrusion upon the narrative rather, the new films around the lives of cabaret dancers and singers came to give greater prominence to the cabaret dancer as the lead. In the films *The Great Gambler* (1979) and *Qurbani* (1980) for instance, Zeenat plays a cabaret singer, while Parveen takes over this role in films like *Kaalia* (1981) and *Namak Halaal* (1982).⁶⁹ This is a crucial refashioning of the social norms that

⁶⁸ V.S. Gopalakrishnan, ‘The Pain of Growing Up in the Public Eye’, *Filmfare*, 1 May 1981, National Film Archive of India.

⁶⁹ Shakti Samanta, *The Great Gambler*, Action, Crime, Romance (Associated Films & Finance Corporation, 1979); Feroz Khan, *Qurbani*, Action, Crime, Drama (F.K. International, 1980); Tinnu

governed the performance of the cabaret dancer as ‘public woman’. The integration of the cabaret dancer into the cinematic narrative was a collapse of the categories of conjugal and illegitimate desire since the heroines were no longer divided into chaste and seductive, but could embody both. The cabaret dancer in these films is assimilated into the moral order by finding love within the narrative, a storyline not possible for the earlier cabaret dancers.

While scholars regard this as liberatory, it could be said that this assimilation of the heroine into the narrative fold also trapped the otherwise diffused desire of the cabaret dancer as it became concentrated on the hero. Now the cabaret dancer’s affections are also framed by the hero. Increasingly, as the cabaret singer/dancer in the film finds love, she is bound to an object of desire and has her desirability contained through her relationship with the hero. As has been suggested, the female actor was not an object of the gaze primarily because her sexuality was directed at the hero, not the audience. Her relationship with the hero shielded her from being considered available by the audience; with the new heroines, there is an emergence of an actor who could play both these roles—she could appear seductive to the audience and alluring to the hero. Further, this also follows a period when the club is beginning, though not entirely, to lose its connotations and becomes the site of heterosexual desire as the lead couple comes to replace the cameo cabaret performers. In the song “Aaja Aaja Main Hoon Pyar Tera” (come to me, I am your love), for instance, the nightclub becomes not a space of diffused sexuality but is captured within the terms of cis-heterosexual desire.⁷⁰

Anand, *Kaalia*, Action, Drama (Bobby Enterprises, 1981); Prakash Mehra, *Namak Halaal*, Action, Comedy, Drama, 1982.

⁷⁰ Asha Bhonsle and Mohammed Rafi, "Aaja Aaja Main Hoon Pyar Tera", *Teesri Manzil* (Saregama, 1966), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lTgbq5vXJD8>.

This shift in representations of sexuality was also followed by a shift in the aural and visual grammar of the cabaret sequence.

Here, we must look carefully at the aesthetic differences between the cabaret performance of the 60s and 70s by figures such as Bindu and Helen, and the cabaret performances by Zeenat and Parveen. Both the actors were hardly recognised for their dancing talent. This is not to comment on their skills, but to argue that the ‘erotic musical bodies’ of cabaret changed form as dance virtuosity receded to the background, and it was the musical style of pop and disco which came to be foregrounded. One could consider these differences through two performances around the same period—the performance of Helen in the song “Yeh Mera Dil” (this heart of mine), from the film *Don*, and the performance of Parveen Babi in the song “Jawan Jaaneman” (young lovers), from *Namak Halaal*.⁷¹ The song “Yeh Mera Dil” is filmed in a hotel room, and shows the reluctant hero in the form of Amitabh, who shuns her advances. It contains many elements of the cabaret performance that we have already discussed—the camera focused on parts of the body, particularly the legs and waist, the outfit cut out to reveal the female hourglass form, and the excessive and exaggerated movements of the waist, bosom and legs which the camera is not shy to focus on. She writhes across the floor, and runs her fingers through her body, and then the hero’s, all reminiscent of our discussion in the previous section. As opposed to this, in the song “Jawan Jaaneman”, Parveen is flanked by the exaggerated set which draws out attention away from her body towards the grandeur of the setting. The excessive use of gold, the revolving domes frame her body which is no longer the sole focus of the viewer. Throughout the song, she mouths the lyrics, while walking

⁷¹ Bhonsle, “Yeh Mera Dil”; Asha Bhonsle, “Jawan Jaaneman”, *Namak Halaal* (HMV, 1982), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5bEkgKTZmw>.

around the audience—though at a distance from them, the camera follows her, without for a moment bringing our attention to the parts of her body, except her front profile. The song itself brings together the global inflection of pop music which frames her cosmopolitan body. In this sense, this period is also marked by a subduing of female eroticism expressed in the cabaret dance, in great contrast with the flamboyance of a figure like Helen.



Figure 13: Parveen Babi. Cover of *Filmfare*, July 16-31, 1982. The transition of the cabaret dancer as the open secret of sexuality to the cover page indicates the shifting sexual politics in cinema executing on the novel modernity of the 'musical body'. Her flamboyant yet tasteful outfit speaks to the glitzy glamour of both the cabaret dancer and the emerging disco culture



Figure 14: Advertisement for Nazia and Zoheb Hassan's album *Disco Deewane* (HMV, 1981). It is often regarded as the first pop album from the subcontinent. Her comportment and her youth speak to the transitioning bodies and sounds of the 80s. Source: National Film Archive of India.

This particular moment led to new faces, new styles, bodies and articulations of sexuality and cosmopolitanism. The shift from the split body of the cabaret dancer and the heroine to the integrated figure of the new heroine also accompanied a shift in the musical style, with a greater integration of pop and disco music in the Hindi film. This too signals a new global cosmopolitan aesthetic. The first disco track, "Aap Jaisa Koi" (someone like you), launched both Zeenat Aman, and the short-lived Indian career of Nazia and Zoheb Hassan.⁷² The young Pakistani British artists and the modern svelte body of Zeenat Aman marked a new youthful exuberance in music which was lost in the desiring voices of the cabaret. The launch of Nazia Hassan, Queen of pop, was particularly part of a synthesis of the commodification of music

⁷² Nazia Hassan, "Aap Jaisa Koi", *Qurbani* (HMV, 1980).

through the figure of the pop star, which would become more prominent in the 80s and undergo an explosive transformation through artistes like Alisha Chinai in the 90s. Nazia challenged the hegemony of the Mangeshkar sisters. Along with this, though, the changing song aesthetic also displaced the female dancing body of the cabaret with the male dancing body becoming a prominent part of the nightclub. Though this was already underway with actors such as Shammi Kapoor who brought the fun and frolic of rock music—its twists, head movements and pelvic jerks—to Hindi cinema, it is accentuated best in the film *Disco Dancer* (1982).⁷³

The New Bodies of Disco

With the popularity of disco music, there was also a transformation in the representation of sexuality and the representation of city-spaces wherein male sexuality made an appearance, the nightclub was de-eroticised and its dance structured. The sounds of Bappi Lahiri met the choreography of Vijay-Oscar. In disco, movement becomes as important as the musical style—unlike the unstructured performances of the cabaret, disco follows a loose, but evident structure characterised by a range of outfits and movements that are part of a global cultural phenomenon. If cabaret foregrounded the visual display of the female body, the musical style is foregrounded in disco. According to Vijayakar, this song sequence or “sound aesthetic in many ways indexes the social upheaval that India endured in the 1970s and ’80s, the diminishing value of lyrics, as well as changing depictions of feminine sexuality in the era of the filmic representations of the ‘angry young man.’”⁷⁴

⁷³ See Anna Morcom, *Hindi Film Songs and The Cinema*, 70. for reference to the hybrid style of Shammi Kapoor which mixed bhangra with Elvis Presley’s moves. Babbar Subhash, *Disco Dancer*.

⁷⁴ Vijayakar, *The History of Indian Film Music*, 98.

Vijayakar is referring to the commonly held assumption that the representation of the ‘angry young man’ had a direct relation with the emergency of 1975-1977. Looking at it through a history of shifting musical forms and accompanying representations from the cabaret to the disco tells us a slightly different story of the ‘sound aesthetic’, and one may add, visual aesthetic. The club of the 80s becomes a space for masculine expression through dance.

In the films *Disco Dancer* (1982) and *Kasam Paida Karne Wale Ki* (1984), one could even think of Mithun as the imitative angry young man who expresses his angst with song and dance rather than with violence or crime. Disco works with the conspicuous absence of gender that often shields masculinity.⁷⁵ In the song “I am a Disco Dancer” from the eponymous film, Mithun declares a new kind of musical body. Here the body is declared, its identity cemented with the space and the sounds of disco. While this song also functions as a playscape, celebrating life through lines *Zindagi mera gaana* (life is my song), one sees the song has been foregrounded along with the body. The body becomes intertwined with sounds.

Disco not only welcomed the male-dancing body, it is with disco that Bollywood cemented its relations with pop. This emerging disco-pop body, executed both through the characteristic movements of disco and the new found sounds of the synthesiser indicates an emerging relation with consumption and globalisation within modernity. Its loud spaces with ample glitter and disco lights, its shockingly vibrant aesthetic heralds the death of austerity that characterised the split image of the sombre heroine and the desiring cabaret dancer. Further, films such as *Star* (1982) and *Disco Dancer* indicated the emerging star presence surrounding the commodification of

⁷⁵ Babbar Subhash, *Kasam Paida Karne Wale Ki*, Action, Drama (B. Subhash Movie Unit, 1984).

music as technological changes (discussed in chapter 2) enabled greater production and distribution and the popularity of Nazia Hassan pushed pop into prominence.⁷⁶ The development of the synthesiser transformed the production of disco music, with Charanjit Singh, a Bollywood composer being credited with the composition of the first acid house album in the world titled *Ten Ragas to a Disco Beat* and the new club spaces indicated an emerging urban culture.⁷⁷ In *Janbaaz* (1986) for instance, the disco-cabaret number “Pyaar Do Pyaar Lo” (Give me Love) which was to be shot in London was eventually shot at Studio 29, Bombay.⁷⁸ The availability of this set up and equipment which only happened when the club opened in 1981, demonstrates a new found possibility of modern urban life that was largely mediated and provided imagery to cinema.

Despite the musical phenomenon of disco, it was often regarded as inferior to the music of yesteryears. As Talal Mahmood comments:

There was a radical change in film music. Romance went out, violence came in. Melody gave way to western pop. You can't sing about grace and beauty in a discotheque. I couldn't cope with the change in the trend of music; the change was sudden, very sudden. I felt completely disoriented.⁷⁹

There was a flippancy attributed to disco music. Often it is alleged that Disco was a crude, almost embarrassing attempt by Hindi film to incorporate dance forms from outside the sphere of its borders. The binary between beat and melody privileged by music critics and composers saw Disco as a distortion and a hapless attempt to align itself with a global mass and ‘crass’ popular taste. Rajiv Vijayakar describes it as “a beats oriented western number filmed with gaudy costumes, psychedelic lights,

⁷⁶ Vinod Pande, *Star, Drama, Musical*, 1982.

⁷⁷ Charanjit Singh - *Synthesizing: Ten Ragas to A Disco Beat*, accessed 12 May 2021, <https://www.discogs.com/release/2108668-Charanjit-Singh-Synthesizing-Ten-Ragas-To-A-Disco-Beat>.

⁷⁸ Feroz Khan, *Janbaaz*, Action, Drama (F.K. International, 1986).

⁷⁹ Talat Mahmood to journalist Meena Khurana in 1990s in Bose, *Bollywood*, 243.

pelvic thrusts from the enacting actors and flippant lyrics with some English words.”⁸⁰

In many senses then, the idea of the western other would not be shaken at the time.

Even as the musical style was transforming the landscape of film music and gender representation, it was regarded as foreign. Disco at the time was further embedded in an internal hierarchy as it challenged the supremacy of melody that drew on Hindustani and raga music. Its emphasis on beats meant that it was held subordinated to ‘good’ music and seen as the purview of the masses. Disco as a primarily mass form is very much imbricated in the circulation of conflicts and resolutions of modern life. Disco, which circulates and informs two phantasmagoric on-screen and off-screen performances, suggests a moment of an orderly, dismantled assemblage that circulates in several mediated forms in popular culture.

The kitsch and exuberant sensuality of Disco mirrored the vision of a utopian, young, modern city. Bombay, which became the stage for most of these narratives, embodied a space of possibilities and freedom. With the 70s, the village/city binary which was the rallying point of arguments on the hazards and desires of modern life, began to lose its significance as narratives increasingly concentrated on mapping protagonists in urban settings as inhabitants of modern life. Disco is part of the media assemblage of modern life, it transforms and foresees our engagement with playful modernity.

⁸⁰ Vijayakar, *The History of Indian Film Music*, 98.

Item Numbers

Following the death of the cabaret sequence, the Hindi film saw the revival of the dancing woman in the form of the pejoratively titled ‘item girl’.⁸¹ Unlike the cabaret dancer, the item girl is not associated with any particular space. The item girl embodies new attitudes to female sexuality, particularly as item songs begin to be performed by lead actors rather than actors who were renowned primarily for cabaret, the item number shifts, both in its sounds and its space unbounded by the constraints of any form. We move from the so-called western rhythms and western spaces of the cabaret, to the any-space-whatsoever, and any-sound-whatsoever of the new item number, embodied also in any body, along the varying registers of stardom and anonymity.⁸² Not only is the song disconnected from the narrative, but the space, sometimes discotheques, sometimes over a train or sometimes in an undefined space promises new potentialities of femininity disconnected from the city of sin that the nightclub represented.

The item song’s performer remains a mix between unknown actors and popular stars. These shifts, first from the nightclub space to the “any-space-whatsoever” of the item song, and secondly, from slotted dancers to a more open embrace of the item song by the lead actors indicates crucial transformations in the

⁸¹ Silpa Mukherjee, ‘Behind the Green Door: Unpacking the Item Number and Its Ecology’, *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 9, no. 2 (December 2018): 208–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974927618814027>; Ravneet Kaur, ‘Framing the Body and the Body of Frame: Item Songs in Popular Hindi Cinema’, *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia* 12, no. 2 (1 January 2011): 101–24, <https://doi.org/10.15388/AOV.2011.1.3929>.

⁸² The term is used by Deleuze to define the varied potentialities of space. Quoting Beckett’s ‘For to end yet again’, he reaffirms that this space is: ‘neither here nor there where all the footsteps ever fell can never fare nearer to anywhere nor from anywhere further away’ (Beckett, 1995c, p. 246). Quoted in Garin Dowd https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9781137481146_9. This term has been appropriated by the author, to refer to the simple parting of any fixed space or sound/visual aesthetic which one finds in the cabaret and even the disco.

makeup of sexuality within and outside cinema. The item song is also in some forms both extremely gendered, its movements and music designed to provoke, and neutralised by the increased presentation of item numbers by the male leads.

Rita Brara defines the item song as “cine-segment comprising an item girl/boy, a racy song, a vivacious dance and a surround of erotic and immanent exuberance.”⁸³ Akshaya Kumar have suggested that the item number is primarily a vehicle for star persona.⁸⁴ This is echoed by other scholars who consider the item number a “star vehicle” (see previous section on stardom). This phenomenon became associated with A-list actors much more recently than is assumed. The term emerged in the 90s with the song “Main Aayi Hoon UP Bihar Lootne” (I have to rob UP and Bihar), picturised on Shilpa Shetty.⁸⁵ While the item number gained popularity in 2000s with the appearance of unknown dancers such as Isha Koppikar in “Khallas” (Finished!), it was soon taken over by dancers such as Malaika Arora Khan, mentioned above, who is known exclusively as an item dancer.⁸⁶

For a long time, item numbers were reserved for upcoming and unknown dancers such as Celina Jaitley and Yana Gupta. Like Gupta, there have been models from other countries that have featured in item songs. As the primary purpose of the item song is to market the film, sometimes the item song can overtake the reputation of films. “Sheila Ki Jawaani” (Sheila’s youth) and “Munni Badnaam Hui” (Munni

⁸³ Rita Brara, ‘The Item Number: Cinesexuality in Bollywood and Social Life’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 45, no. 23 (2010): 68, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27807108>.

⁸⁴ Akshaya Kumar, ‘Item Number/Item Girl’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 40, no. 2 (3 April 2017): 338–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2017.1295209>.

⁸⁵ Sapna Awasthi and Chetan Shashitaal, “Main Aayi Hoon U.P. Bihar Lootne”, *Shool* (T-Series, 1999), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Dh0HwU6q-8>. See Akshaya Kumar (2017) Item Number/Item Girl, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 40:2, 338–341, DOI: [10.1080/00856401.2017.1295209](https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2017.1295209).

⁸⁶ Asha Bhonsle, Sapna Awasthi, and Sudesh Bhonsle, *Khallas*, Company (T-Series, 2002), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vt8cSLswQWc>.

lost her reputation), are some examples of songs that exceeded the popularity of the film.⁸⁷ This is enabled by an industry that composes “an item that is self-sufficient in its melodic draw, and which can therefore be received, reproduced and remembered in isolation i.e., irrespective of the filmic situation in which it is intended to appear.”⁸⁸

While earlier item numbers were shown within the film, although disconnected from the narrative, increasingly they have become standalone items that are marketed separately. Sometimes the item number can be released before the film to promote it, and in some cases, it does not have any place in the film. The song “Character Dheela” (loose morals), from the film *Ready* only shows up in the end credits. As Gehlawat has observed, the item number is both part of and separate from the film.⁸⁹

While some item dancers like Malaika Arora were well-known, increasingly established actors such as Kareena Kapoor, Katrina Kaif and Deepika Padukone have performed item numbers. If the cabaret was a standard song piece of the 60s and 70s, increasingly it is the item number that has become the norm in mainstream cinema.

Some scholars consider ‘item’ to be a derogatory term that refers to the female dancers who perform them as objects, the ‘*item girl*’.⁹⁰ This theory conceives of the item number as pure voyeurism. As Bindu Nair comments, the dancer is a powerless figure, fragmented by the camera.⁹¹ This indicates the objectification of the female body into discrete parts rather than a whole person. While the item number does fragment the female body, our re-reading of the cabaret provides clues to consider

⁸⁷ Sunidhi Chauhan and Vishal Dadlani, “Sheila Ki Jawani”, *Tees Maar Khan* (T-Series, 2010), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZTmF2v59CtI>; Mamta Sharma and Aishwarya, “Munni Badnaam Hui”, *Dabangg* (T-Series, 2010), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jn5hsfbhWx4>.

⁸⁸ Ranade, *Hindi Film Song*, 167.

⁸⁹ See Ajay Gehlawat (2017) The picture is not yet over!: The end credits song sequence in Bollywood, *South Asian Popular Culture*, 15:2-3, 203-216, DOI: [10.1080/14746689.2017.1407546](https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2017.1407546)

⁹⁰ Kumar, ‘Item Number/Item Girl’.

⁹¹ Bindu Nair, ‘Female Body and the Male Gaze: Laura Mulvey and Hindi Cinema’, in *Films and Feminism: Essays in Indian Cinema*, ed. Jasbir Jain and Sudha Rai (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2002), 52–58.

fragmentation as choreography, to think about not only the body it represents but the narratives it is constructing.

The eroticism of the dancer is displaced in an item song, but as any reference to item numbers demonstrates, the item number is also a space of reinforcing the sensuality of the actor. It purportedly provides the director a space where unbridled objectification becomes possible. According to Shoma Chatterji, item numbers are both voyeuristic but also give space for the “desiring presence” of the woman with lyrics on female seduction.⁹² One could extend this to consider how the musical body of the dancer in the item number constructs seduction, not only through the lyrics but also the music and the performance itself. Rather than reducing this to a voyeuristic pleasure, one could consider the effects of the merging of these various elements into a singular text.

Due to the presence of the seductive dancing woman, the item number is regarded as a successor to the cabaret sequence leading to references to the cabaret retrospectively as the item number. But they are distinguished in their form, even though they are both sensual performances which are disconnected from the narrative. It is also a misplaced conclusion since the cabaret had some tenuous relationship with the film while the item number is increasingly made solely as a piece of attraction. Further, the cabaret is a specific kind of performance set inside the nightclub i.e., the cabaret space, whereas the item number is frequently set in a fantastic, spectacular space lacking any adherence to particular spaces. An item number can happen in any setup unrelated to the film.

⁹² Chatterji, *Subject Cinema, Object Women*.

Thus, while the earlier cabaret sequence was defined by its space, the item number varies between modern, exotic and untraceable spaces. Songs such as 2012 song “Anarkali Disco Chali” (Anarkali goes to Disco), from the film *Housefull 2*, Malaika Arora, the quintessential item girl subverts the space of the disco as it comes to be inhabited by her body—first in a courtesan outfit and later a glitzy silver outfit of the disco period.⁹³ In the song, she begins with reference to the classic romance between Salim and Anarkali depicted in the film *Mughal-e-azam* (1960) and transitions from the chest heaves popularised by Madhuri Dixit to the more contemporary framing of her face and body using her hands against the background of dancers. The male dancers that surround her in the song portray her as a desiring figure, yet the lyrics say *mujh ko pyaari azadi, qaid mein ab nahi rehna* (I love my freedom, no more will I be caged). The lyrics are reminiscent of the contemporary discourses of freedom of the female body as she is freed from the clutches of the split between conjugality and modernity. In the song, the disco thus becomes once more a space for diffused female desire, now articulated through the liberal discourse. Further, the songs of tabla and autotune as they intertwine to produce the new disco sound remind us of the assimilation of the playscape into the fold of local musical rhythms. The contemporary item song in this sense, refashions the entirety of the structure of cabaret and disco as it was set before the 90s. The movements and sounds are intermingled with an aesthetic that can neither be characterised as Indian nor western, it is its own hybrid mix. As technology has made it possible, the female body moves beyond the spaces assigned to her and this restructuring of the place of the female body is depicted in the pastiche of the item song. There remains no more fixity

⁹³ Mamta Sharma and Sukhwinder Singh, *Anarkali Disco Chali*, *Housefull 2* (T-Series, 2012), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sONw3dihCRs>.

of bodies as unknown stars, models both local and global, and lead actors all perform the item song. There remains, as we have seen in the case of “Anarkali”, no fixity of movement, attire or sounds. In this sense, the contemporary item song has redrawn the limits of the cabaret to become an evasive, and all permeating force of desire. Its musical body becomes an ever-transforming endeavour with no cohesion of movement, space and bodies.

The lack of fixity of space can be seen in many other songs, sometimes, in the nightclub, or on the road, and sometimes in an entirely abstract space. In the song “Kamli Kamli” from *Dhoom 3* (2013), Katrina Kaif dances against the backdrop of just such a space—the dark space surrounds her with under-construction sites, complete with sparks flying and steel rods erected in the sequence of an incomplete building.⁹⁴ Katrina wears a simple denim dungaree and a white t-shirt, the acrobatic sexuality of her dance performance contradicted by her attire which refuses to reveal the contours of her body, though in the course of the song she strips down to a pair of shorts and what looks to be a sports bra. Though, this is one of few songs in which the woman is so dressed, it indicates to us the distinct language of the item number—particularly when picturised on the lead actor. The contemporary item number has no fixity of performance styles—of movements, lighting, space or sound. In this particular song, the sensuality of her body competes with the dance performance which is closer to an Olympic event than a sensual one. The dance performance is a mix of sensuality—with scenes of her writhing on the floor and acrobatic ability as she kicks around and flies off the walls. The dance steps foreground not her body’s appearance, but what the body can do—its possible movements which again are not

⁹⁴ Sunidhi Chauhan, “Kamli Kamli”, *Dhoom 3* (T-Series, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8kSrKz8Hz8>.

defined as in the case of the cabaret in which the body titillates and invites the gaze to its various parts. The picturisation of this song keeps Katrina at a safe distance from the camera and at no point focuses on erotic aspects of the body like the thigh, the waist, or even the face. The lyrics are set in Punjabi, a reference to the deep linguistic relation between Hindi film and Punjabi. The voice too is transformed by the use of autotune, foregrounding the technological apparatus of the song. The entire song is enacted before and voiced for a clear object of desire, played by Aamir Khan which is reminiscent of the last chapter's argument that the lead actor's performance is de-eroticised when the object of her desire, embodied in the figure of the lead male actor becomes its focus.

This transformation also indicates transformations in the social understanding of sexuality. With the new movements around women's attire, their participation and presence in public space which have opened up seething issues of female repression; the item number, in its lack of fidelity to musical, movement or spatial tropes indicates an explosion of the 'public woman' as she transgresses the space of the club to become a diffused social presence, unidentifiable by markers of moral difference. The debates around club life, such as the Pink Chaddi campaign and the Playboy club debate indicate that the club too is becoming a normalised part of social life and becoming truly a leisure space for the youth. The negotiations around sexuality in the contemporary club space are indicative of the cosmopolitan consumption that characterises our lives. It is important to regard this change through a new way in which dance economies function today. As dance becomes a leisure activity, becoming part of the everyday lives through dance shows, classes and discotheques,

there is a displacement of the sexuality of the body.⁹⁵ Technological shifts and globalisation have ensured that song and bodies, their representations travel across society, becoming delinked from the body of the item number dancer. The various song and dance shows bring new meaning to the film song in public spheres. Sangita Shresthova defines the international circulation of dance as dance in “restaged” forms.⁹⁶ Her work stages a link between the film dance text and the reception of the form, extending “performance traditions” to reconstruct performances of Indian culture and identity staged through song visualisations and their reconstructions. This work also echoes with Rita Brara’s work on *Cinesexuality* that repugns the voyeuristic, sexually charged female body on the film to think of the multiple contexts of reproduction of performances and forms of iterating and reshaping text’s sexuality into a diffused constantly translated, unfinished project.⁹⁷ This new any-space and any-body transform the cultural terrain of sexuality by transgressing the moral order which divided dancing women. It indicates the pervasiveness of the song culture and the delinking of public morality from the item number.

Conclusion

As media technology evolves, the floating figure of the female body becomes even more apparent. Contributions on the Hindi film song are increasingly exploring this flow of the song across various spaces and media. In the second chapter, we discussed how contemporary music exists parallelly to the film. These new

⁹⁵For reference to Reality Dance shows and Hindi film song, see Pallabi Chakravorty, ‘Sensory Screens, Digitized Desires: Dancing Rasa from Bombay Cinema to Reality TV’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies*, by Pallabi Chakravorty, ed. Douglas Rosenberg (Oxford University Press, 2016), 124–42, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199981601.013.6>.

⁹⁶ Sangita Shresthova, *Is It All About Hips?: Around the World with Bollywood Dance*, First edition (New Delhi; Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications Pvt. Ltd, 2011).

⁹⁷ Brara, ‘The Item Number: Cinesexuality in Bollywood and Social Life’.

fragmented explorations of media require us to think anew the nature of interpretation of popular culture. The contemporary Hindi film song has its own autonomous existence, as we have seen in the case of the ‘item number’, the song is often a commodity that is complete in itself and whose rights are often sold separately.⁹⁸ This divide between the song and film means that the Hindi Film song exists within and outside the narrative at the same time. According to Vasudevan, song is a “grid of performance that is both inside/outside the text.”⁹⁹ This is echoed by Sangita Gopal and Sujata Moorti who argues that the song and dance sequences establish a cultural space which is internal to the film and autonomous from it.¹⁰⁰ But this can also mean more than the simple existence of song outside film, one could consider how song cultures—both audio and visual flow both in and out of cinema. The sites of cabaret in Mira Nair’s film correspond with the colours and attire of the cinematic cabaret, just as the outfits and moves of disco made their way into the everyday lives of the Bombay middle-classes. Thus, it has been acknowledged that contemporary reception, circulation and to some extent, the production of songs are increasingly unyoked from the film. The female body, increasingly becomes a floating figure that glides between the spaces of and outside the film.

With YouTube and TikTok, song can now be reinterpreted and distributed independently of the original singer or dancer. The moves that become popular or are reinterpreted by new choreographers and performers change the meaning of songs as they move within cultural practices. Song happens in the “cultures of reception.”¹⁰¹ The song has a life, long after the film. With the facilitations of technology, the

⁹⁸ Iyer, ‘Film Dance, Female Stardom, and the Production of Gender in Popular Hindi Cinema’.

⁹⁹ Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public*, 144.

¹⁰⁰ Sangita Gopal and Sujata Moorti, eds., *Global Bollywood: Travels of Hindi Song and Dance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

¹⁰¹ Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*.

boundaries which held the cultural order in place are available for subversion. The changing ethos of the middle classes and the varying global flows of song leave open room for newer interpretations of female body and desire. Song can be remembered and experienced anew in these fresh spaces and through re-interpretations like the remix. The song's success assures how it lives on in public memory in terms of both sound and image, its image evoking sound and the sound evoking image, and sometimes producing them anew. These transformations also require newer frames of analysis on the affective hold of song and dance as it moves through spaces and bodies.

Conclusion

To recapitulate the arguments in this thesis, the work has made a foray into the history of song between the 50s to 80s in Hindi cinema, focusing primarily on the transition of the cabaret to disco as the sounds and bodies shifted with new orientations towards modernity and urban cosmopolitanism. This period in particular has been greatly neglected in understanding the transactions between song, sexuality and society, despite the fact that it has been crucial to the refashioning of modern life. The emergence of pop and disco music heralded a shift in practices of consumption, and this was reflected in the new bodies that came to de-center desire as it was written into the cabaret number. By focusing on notion of the playscape—arguing that cabaret was imbricated in the space of the play defined by attitudes towards desire through its ludic reconceptualization of male and female desire within the Hindi film narrative—the author has interrogated notions of modernity in cinema, often treated as emblematic of the negative attitudes towards modern life as inherited from the west. It has done so through a reworking of this space as new sounds and bodies—defined here as musical bodies—occupied the playscape and displaced the narratives of female desire set in place by the cabaret. In this sense, this work is about the sounds and images of modernity in song. The goal has been to understand how modernity and female desire fed into each other in the cabaret number, not only as a distancing from the narrative which often upheld tradition, but to find new articulations for our engagements with history. Drawing a link between the ‘western’ sounds and so-called western bodies of the cabaret as they transitioned into disco is the author’s assertion that somewhere hidden away from us, there have been tangential and oblique references to our engagement with city life, and urban existence. The cabaret dancer

as the embodiment of modern public life becomes a tool for retracing the representations of this existence as her body referred us to notions of female desire imbricated within it. Disco, and now the item number serve as traces of the musical negotiations with modernity as it displaced female desire and was dispersed into the fabric of cinema.

The thesis begins with a discussion on Hindi cinema and popular culture to understand how sexuality could be placed within the fold of these arguments by looking at the place accorded to a historical and political understanding of cinema. By exposing the caveats in these arguments, it seeks to suggest that a rethinking of the nature of sexuality in cinema must focus on the metaphorical dimensions of history that veer away from the defining place given to the nation in the writing of Hindi cinema. This work follows it by bringing attention to a certain internal history of cinema, one defined by shifts in form that correspond with societal changes. The first chapter is also provided for the reader to understand the difficulties of writing about cinema, and about popular culture in general. There has been a certain propensity to understand the consumption of popular culture from within models of power, hegemony and resistance. By tracing the beginnings of a closer look at cultural forms through a rigorous definition of what constitutes popular culture, the first section helps orient and familiarise the reader with the context of the debates. Our understanding of power and popular culture has been greatly influenced by the works of thinkers such as Theodore Adorno, Raymond Williams, Walter Benjamin and Stuart Hall. In this thesis, these approaches have been critiqued for limiting our understanding of the audience and screen relationship. While Adorno's work on "culture industry" has garnered much criticism since its publication, more recent work influenced by Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault tend to treat cinema as ideological

apparatus or site of discursive power. The assigning of these theories to cinema reduces films to monolithic entities without taking into account the diversity of creative, emotional and ideological forces that go into the creation of individual films. Instead of such an approach, the work advocates close attention to individual readings and to minor histories rather than major transitions. These transitions though not considered events are not to be taken as incidental, but as crucial to new readings into popular culture. In particular, cabaret has been relegated to an act of resistance or as evidence of the low-brow culture of cinema. New readings into popular culture, also means that we think of the cabaret beyond this dialectic and understand its formal components to give it its due in the landscape of film.

In the following section, the work gives the reader a critical approach to writings on Hindi cinema. Beginning with how our understanding of early cinema has been skewed due to the focus on mythological at the expense of other film 'genres' of the period, it seeks to establish that particular narratives of Hindi cinema have taken hold of our imagination. This is attributed to the scholarship in which cinema and nation are intertwined to present cinema as a form of social history. Arguing against this approach, the work goes onto critique any attempt at formulating a comprehensive understanding of film that hinges on the nation. These attempts have often relied on Frederic Jameson's account of third-world popular culture. Itself highly problematic, this work has been critiqued by scholars such as Aijaz Ahmad who have rightly pointed out that such an approach ignores multiple, parallel and contradictory traditions and tends to collapse the vast field of popular culture to the narrow paradigm of nation. This chapter is concerned with problematizing definitions that underlie dominant scholarship on cinema and popular culture, pointing out that the terms themselves are elusive and difficult to capture. The endeavour in this thesis

is to move beyond these readings and to suggest that modernity happens in the interstices of history.

In the following chapter, the author concerns herself with the Hindi film song. This chapter is expansive in its scope since it seeks to capture the definitions of Hindi film song that have informed its study. The first, and most important of these is the popularity of the Hindi film song. Given that it occupies a central place in Hindi film cultures, it is important that we understand how the discourse of its popularity has come into place, and the role of its history, particularly in terms of distribution which has made it part of what Peter Manuel describes as “aural public space.”¹ The first section of the thesis is concerned with this question. Due to its inextricability with Hindi cinema, early scholarship on the subject concerned itself with comparisons of the Hindi film with the west. This becomes a tool of difference, marking Hindi cinema as the ‘other’, a point that is also touched upon in the first chapter. Critique of such comparison is necessary for us to rethink the relationship between songs and popular culture and move beyond ‘national’ accounts of Hindi film songs. In a much more refined sense, the idea of song as the national-popular has guided scholarship to a similar study. If we were to reduce the popularity of the Hindi film song to its national presence, we miss out on a closer analysis of its relation to modernity. Instead, we can think of its popularity in relation to developing technological apparatus. What follows, then, is an overview of the technological changes that have greatly affected the listening and production of song. From early cinema, song has played an important role in films, it has been a form of storytelling, and as technological advancements have allowed, it has also changed in form—both its aural and visual representations have undergone shifts due to this. In particular, the

¹ Manuel, *Cassette Culture*.

separation of the singer and the actor, both roles which were played by a single figure due to technological constraints made possible the making of singers as celebrities in their own right. Further technological advancements brought new changes particularly with the growth of the cassette industry. Today, the possible avenues of listening to or watching songs have expanded such that there is disarticulation of song from the film entirely. This also has important implications for the circulation of bodies in popular culture. The second section of the thesis is concerned with theories around the Hindi film song. If early scholarship focused on the Hindi film song as an intervening, but unnecessary part of the narrative, more recent scholarship has recognised its crucial role and has advanced the scope of the study to include various components of song and its relation to the film, and itself.

The aim of this section has been to understand the relation between song, image and narrative to argue that the song provides an emotional core to the affective sensorium of cinema, thereby condensing its emotional force. By proposing the theory of micro-narrative, it looks at the Hindi film song as a narrative universe that holds various elements in place, and is capable of independent study. While, there have been works on the Hindi film song which have touched upon its narrative relation, these works are few and have neglected to look at the various narrative functions of song. This section aims to correct this gap by providing a variety of ways in which song becomes the narrative, rather than being adjunct to the film narrative. Further on, the work looks more closely at this narrative through a study of the relation between song, image and finally, affect. What is often termed ‘song picturisation’, it is argued, provides a window to think about the relation between the music and the image. Here, song is treated not as secondary to, but fundamental to the meaning of the image. Together, the song and image produce the cinematic affect. Once again, this segment

of the thesis argues that we consider the emotive force of both song and image. By pointing out the caveats in the earlier attempts to stress on the importance of sound, it goes on to argue that both theories, ones which foreground vision and other which foregrounds sound, neglect to understand their dynamic relation. To understand the micro-narrative of song is to place the two together and trace its meaning-making and affective universe through the entanglement of both song and image.

In the following chapter, the work takes a closer look at approaches to song and sexuality as they have been crucial to our imagining of the woman in the Hindi film song. The dancing woman has occupied academic imagination for a long time, despite this, there is little work on the musical aspects of the dancing woman. Instead, research has focused primarily on the idea of the nation informed by Partha Chatterjee's work on the nationalist resolution during the Bengal Renaissance. This work questions this approach as one that limits our understanding of Hindi film and its representations of the female encounter with modernity. Particularly, such an approach limits the agency of women to hegemonic representations and interpretations. This chapter argues that to understand modernity, one must also look at desire. It was the placement of desire that became foregrounded through the figures of the courtesan and cabaret dancer, who represented desirable bodies outside the conjugal fold. The Hindi film form, was often in the form of the family social, which means that the family was the site of the narrative and it was around paternal authority and female silence that desire was constructed. Within this regime, these alternative bodies enunciated varying registers of desire. Rather than arguing for monolithic representations of these figures, it is important to understand the shifting form, the internal history of the cabaret as it moved beyond this model of resolution of the female body into the body of the public/private and traditional/modern and into more

nuanced narratives of modernity. Even within the binary of resolution, desire often found a place to speak from. To understand these shifting articulations of desire is also to look at the shifting histories of representation of the female body. If early cinema was haunted by questions of respectability, cinema of the 50s, which the cabaret inhabited, found solace in the splitting of these bodies into respectable and disrespectable. Looking at the form of this articulation, as it followed certain conventions of the shifting cinematic form helps us understand the crucial role of representation in informing the cinematic narrative. Despite this, as the author has demonstrated in the final chapter, the cabaret body also exceeded these limitations merging various registers of desire which were otherwise tucked away by the narrative. In the section that follows, the work returns to scholarship on the subject to suggest that more recent work has sought to rescue the film song from this concern with visual representations of the female body into a more nuanced understanding of the form of the song and its interactions with the body. In particular, theories of stardom have made some headway into a closer look at the song and sexuality. Despite this, the work argues that the question of stardom is still unresolved. It stresses on the enigmatic character of the star and makes a distinction between the varying registers of stardom, and whether this term can be loosely applied to the varied figures that inhabit the universe of the film song. Instead, this work proposes that we look at what Erin Brannigan has termed the “screened body.” The screened body holds a certain anonymity, she morphs according to the cinematic space she occupies and it is this affective relation between the body and the audience—one which happens as an encounter with song—with which this work is concerned. Employing a critique of star identity as a “biographical fallacy”, it is suggested that the closer look at the screen is still required to understand the place of the body in

song. The biography of the star is often a miniscule part of their stardom, which is influenced largely by their on-screen persona, and the construction of enigma. Max Weber, who could be credited as one of the few thinkers to write about this sense of enigma associated with charismatic public figures brings us back to the affective force of the star. This term therefore requires to be used with caution, and is not easily applicable, or even comprehensible by referring to personal identities. For this reason, the work eschews this discussion, as the body of female desire is always in excess of such models of stardom, if for no other reason than because, the cabaret dancer was often not a star in the Weberian sense of the term. Instead, the concern with the screened body invites a new set of questions, and a distinct approach to the interaction between sound and image in the production of affect.

In the fourth chapter, the work progresses to look at the shaping of the cabaret dancer as the screened body. Here, the author proposes the concept of the musical body—a body which takes in the rhythms of the song, and through its choreography brings new meanings to the sounds it reverberates, a body which constructs and refashions the spaces it occupies. The aim in this chapter has been to think about the screen by tracing its shifts in relation to musical bodies. In particular, the work argues that the period from 50s to 80s presents us with minute histories of representations as they imbricate bodies and sounds. Beginning with the 50s, the cabaret dancer's body has been established as the body of desire. Despite this, there has been little attempt to look at the various modalities of desire which she brings to the narrative, or as the author may put it, to look at the micro-narratives of desire in cabaret, and on its micro-histories. This chapter does so by thinking about the cabaret space as a playscape which makes possible varying articulations of the body. The playfulness of cabaret is not only in this articulation, but the very form. The unstructured nature of

the dance form makes possible a certain fluidity of representation—the cabaret dancer is in many ways a cosmopolitan figure, but more than that she is a fluid, performative figure. The playscape is neither local, nor global but a certain hybrid bundling together of its multiple forms. The lack of structure in the cabaret makes possible an invention of the grammar of song-dance. Understood in this way, the cabaret dancer is a fluid, performative figure whose enunciations of desire are part of a certain ludic femininity. Drawing on the previous chapter which sought to understand the modernity of the cabaret dancer, the playscape becomes a window to understand how modernity shaped articulations of desire. If the cabaret dancer, given her fringe status in Hindi film became the voice of the desiring and desirable woman, this chapter has attempted to understand the specifics of desire within this space. The playscape becomes a stage where the excesses of modernity can be cherished and enjoyed, it is a space where desire allows for a free-flow without the restraints of the narrative. The articulations of sexuality thereby vary from a critique of heterosexual desire, which was otherwise reaffirmed by the narrative, to an affirmation of female desire. There is, one could argue, some agency in this space, but this agency must be taken with a pinch of salt since it is also constructed from within cinema, she speaks not through her voice, but the voice that is demanded of her. Despite this, its critique of heterosexual desire must also be celebrated for subverting the patriarchal authority of the narrative. And finally, the multiple ways in which desire is performed in the cabaret makes clear that there are always parallel narratives through which the voice and image are integrated in film.

In the final chapter, the work studies the transition of this playful desire to the new bodies that came to inhabit the screen in the 80s. The first of these is the new heroine who unified the splitting of the desiring dancing women but also subdued

desire through its choreography and narrative. The heroines who occupied the 80s often subverted the distinction between western and Indian, but at the same time, we see that the visceral possibilities of desire realised in the vigorous movements and rhythms of cabaret were also subdued as the women became assimilated into the narrative. Despite the celebratory unification, the body of the new woman no longer expresses the same potency of seduction. The simulation made possible through the camera, through the lyrics and movements is absent as it becomes narrative reality. The author attributes this shift to the emerging modernity of the 80s. The 80s sees a certain explosion of the musical form of pop that foregrounded the singer and the dancer while bringing attention to the musical form rather than the bodily form of the dancer. The transition from the distinct rhythms of west and east that we find in the 50s now becomes a truly globalised song that finds inspiration from the dominant musical forms that have been circulating across the globe. Technological transactions make it possible for the musical form to be widely distributed and music loses the elitism that was reserved for the gramophone. The cassette industry and further channels of distribution which have been covered in the second chapter play a very important role in the dissemination of music as it trickles to the 'masses' and becomes part of popular culture, blurring the distinctions which separated the listening cultures of the elite and the popular masses. The English numbers in particular which were often reserved for a certain audience are now available en masse. Not only that, the musical form of the disco in particular was the declaration of this shift. Though often denigrated for being a mimicry of the west, the disco as this work asserts was very much indigenous. It was in fact a sign of globalisation that becomes commonplace in the musical cultures of the 90s and beyond with channels such as MTV and later platforms such as YouTube. It spoke of a new cultural form that was unabashedly

global. Further, trade relations also make it possible for music to be more widely available with the recognition of the market of music which transgresses the boundaries of nation. Modernity of the 80s in this sense needs to be unyoked from the discourses of nationhood and set in parallel with the playscape—a much more effusive articulation where it is the bricolage rather than genres that is foregrounded. The item number further fragments these ideas of modernity as they become attached to the musical body. The new item number cannot be defined through the classifications of cabaret and non-cabaret, or performances of the heroine vs the performances of the fringe characters. While scholars note that the transition of the item dancer from such a character to the lead performances is part of the sexual politics of the contemporary, it is argued here that even this is not entirely fixed. It is not only the lead, but a range of bodies that now perform the item song, including male bodies that come to house fantasies of desire and desirability. In this sense, the item song is what the author terms ‘anyspace/anybody/anysound whatever’. This speaks to us of the new technological shifts in which the body is no longer contained by the narrative but oozes into the very fabric of cinematic cultures, taking on its own distinct life. This is also set in a reciprocal relationship with the cultures of the middle-classes where the performance of sexuality by the body becomes part of the space of home with dance shows and classes. The chapter therefore traces the transitions of the cabaret dancer’s sexuality as it moves beyond the confines of the female body, and of nightclub spaces.

The aim of this work has been to address several disparate issues that have become discursive models for our understanding of cinema. It suggests that these broader models have an influence on the way we have imagined sexuality in cinema, and that a rethinking of some of these concepts will also have an impact on our

interpretations of film. One of the major issues with scholarship on cinema in India is the paucity of literature on sound, which is indicative of a failure to recognize its important role. Despite the much-recognised prevalence of song-dance in the Hindi film, few scholars have attempted a thorough analysis of its form, production, distribution and consumption. This work will have hopefully augmented the literature by emphasising that song-dance are intertwined in our impressions of the song. Video animates music and music in turn gives voice to the image. We must remember that cinema is not merely image, it is the integration of sensory pleasures to create an immersive experience. The attempt made here at integration does not make the disarticulation and discrete critical analysis of song or dance any less valid, but the combination introduces a new set of elements that enable us to see how certain sounds are associated with certain bodies and kinds of performance. In this thesis, it is argued that reading the phenomenon of audio-visuality of cinema, of its aural and visual aspects also forces new readings of the female body as the dancing woman.

Song which has had a central role in the construction of cinematic sexualities remains of limited interest to feminist scholars. Though interpretations of the dancing woman have become more common, and have been part of the discourse within particular frameworks, this work also points out that there is a need to reimagine the female body on-screen. Through a study of the seduction and play of the cabaret dancer, this work follows the possible readings when bodies are constituted by its sounds. As argued in the third chapter, this imbrication of bodies, sounds, spaces, images and words compose micronarratives within film. In this sense, song is part of the cinematic sensorium but is also an affective universe in its own right. The recognition of the song as an interruptive force that intrudes into the narrative order of the film—defined by its clear demarcations of womanhood, in which the cabaret

dancer in particular represents a decadent public woman, yoked to the nationalist spirit—restricts and constrains our understanding of cinema. While recognizing the suspension of cabaret from the narrative—though it could be argued that these songs often contain scenes of suspense that build an ostensible connection with the narrative—this work has also broken down the various uses of song in the film to challenge the meta-narrative of song as interruption to move beyond the relationship between song and film. It has been argued here that song is also a crucial narrative force within the film. Even when it is disconnected, it reveals to us the aesthetic-social principles that govern the screen. By placing the cabaret dancer as the public woman of the song-dance sequence, the song also juxtaposes her sensuality with other characters, particularly the female lead. This is an obvious trope in the Hindi film. In this sense, the song introduces novel juxtapositions that both challenge and reaffirm the narrative of the family drama.

The semantic study of cinema is a difficult project since it must be constantly beware of the fallacy of generalising the cinematic experience and breaking it into neat categories that do not cohere with the affective impact of the film. While recognising the inevitability of individual perspective this work is takes a critical look at the readings on cinema which undertake an ideological study of cinema, arguing that any such narrative must encounter its acceptance of the theory of false consciousness which denies entirely the subjectivity of the one who is spoken about by reducing them to a subject. It introduces caveats to these models as affirmations of the passive spectator, and emphasizes the emotive aspects of film, and in particular the song which is perhaps the condensation of the emotional forces of the film. Within this production of emotional forces lies also the production of sexuality, or in this case, sensuousness in cinema. Whether as disgust or erotica, films perform the sensual

through a set of figures, particularly the dancer. The cabaret dancer is constructed as a figure of desire, invested with the sexual potency of the film, and the apparatus of film redefines and shapes her body through a cinematic mosaic— of sounds, shapes and feelings. A more informed perspective on this aspect of song requires revisiting the image-heavy readings of song and sexuality in cinema and the issues involved in our considerations of cinematic representation to consider the potentialities of affect generated by the screen.

Desire and seduction have been central to debates on the female body, and particularly the cabaret dancer's body. Despite this recognition of the cabaret dancer as desiring body, there has been little work on how the music constructs this desiring body. This dissertation made an attempt to shift our focus away from the gaze to pay attention to the complex of desire constructed through the song, lyrics, voice, etc. It argues that the cabaret sequence is first and foremost a sequence of erotic affectivity. This must not be mistaken as an affirmation of the male gaze or the voyeuristic capabilities of the camera. Rather, it takes advantage of the elusiveness of the word 'desire' to argue that there are a variety of enunciations, sometimes contradictory, for the expression of desire in the Hindi film. Further distinctions indicate the various modalities of desire in the cabaret sequence—including its erotic appeal, its romance and also its sometimes ironic, mocking critique of male desire. By tracing the dancer as a masquerading, performative figure, the work seeks to revise our understanding of culture as a battle of opposites wherein cabaret objectifies or grants agency to female desire.

It is argued that we look at the matrix of desire when looking at sexuality in the song sequence, in particular, the work has demonstrated how the cabaret of the 60s and 70s captured performances of femininity through a making of a desiring and

desirable body which is then traced to imagine the new bodies that displaced the cabaret performers' sensual body with the new heroine, who purportedly marks the merging of the split heroines who inhabited home and public space respectively. While, the public body of this new heroine was voiced by pop music which underwent global explosion in the 70s and became an important part of the musical history of Hindi cinema, the male dancing body was also undergoing changes, evident in the transformation of the representation of nightclub and its music and dance. This is best exemplified by the disco. Towards the end, the thesis briefly comments on the emerging film song-dance cultures of the item number which suspends many of the tropes that defined cabaret—its bodies, voice, space and movements through its transgression of the character of the dance form. As the last chapter has asserted, the new item number has transgressed fixed grammar which within the unstructured performance of the cabaret, gave it some semblance of a language.

This work doubtless has several gaps, some of them perhaps egregious. But hopefully it may serve as a modest harbinger of the beginnings of a serious study of song and sexuality through an analysis of film texts. By merging song and gender studies, this work has argued that the two inform one another, and present a cogent picture of the networks of representation in the Hindi film. The concepts of 'musical body' and song as 'micro-narrative' both seek to contribute to new readings of the screen and song. It is hoped that these readings would be further explored to see how various kinds of narratives flow into the song, and various bodies, with distinct vocabularies participate in the integration of sound and image. Despite the fact that the terms song-dance are often used together, there is little work on how the two interact on screen. The work is an endeavour in this direction, and aims to be one of the many such works which pay attention to the integration of its form. There is a

need for more detailed analysis of the dancing body and sounds. Further undertakings on the variety of emotional registers of the song, its use of romance, sorrow and sometimes humour, would contribute to a finer analysis of the screen. This work has also considered the understanding of sexuality, the female body, outside the classical frames of reference of nation-state, and stardom—looking at song as an important site for sexual politics. Song considered as a space for the varied enunciations of sexuality would unveil further distinct narratives on how sexuality is represented in the Hindi film. This work also subjects to critical scrutiny the biographical approach that has become standard in our analysis of cinema, arguing for a return to the screen. The approach towards the ‘musical body’ of the cabaret is one mode of countering the biographical approach and arguing for a closer analysis of the screen. One could say that it is more interested in the potentiality of meanings encountered by the *feeling* body rather than the *knowing* body. This can of course also prove to be its undoing. Arguing for new frames of analysis, this work has deliberately shunned many of the available frames, using them primarily for a kind of discourse analysis of cinema. It could be argued that due to this, the work may have missed on many other possible readings on cinema, the body and the audience. But such readings are abundant and many more will follow. This work is grounded in the hope that it may hesitantly and with considerable trepidation contribute to emerging alternative conversations.

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by Pranoo Deshraj



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Conducting/Curtailing Pleasure: Notes on leisure, conduct and urban sexuality

■ Pranoo Deshraj

The Day of Pleasure

It is Wednesday. Today is Ladies night in one of the most prominent pubs in the city, 10 Downing Street, located within Lifestyle Mall, Begumpet about 5 or 6 kilometres away from our university hostel. By evening, we have mobilized a set of women to come with us. "This is going to be fun, don't be such a prude". There are free drinks! (This was always hard to believe, until one of our more perceptive friends informs us that this is how they are able to lure more men into the club). We are dressed in outfits we wouldn't normally dare to wear on campuses, much less outside it. We are ready to go. As we begin to leave, we gather our shawls, dupattas, shrugs and jackets to "protect" our bodies from the ravaging but more than that, the suspecting and scandalized eyes of the public: the auto or cab that will take us there, the men/women we are likely to encounter on our way and even to some extent our peers on campus. After all this preparation, we step outside the gates of our campus and wait for an auto (this is ofcourse a narrative before the emergence of on-call cab services). As we wait a number of vehicles pass us by, staring, whistling, passing comments. Sometimes we try to shoo them away, more often than not, we meet their eyes with a steely gaze until they turn away, and sometimes tired of this incessant harassment we just shrug it off. Finally, we reach the club and even before we pass the bouncer at the entrance, our protective gear is off and we enter — made up, free and bursting with excitement.

(Narrative based on interviews 2013-14)

A Lesson in Conduct

I was with two friends... We just wanted to see the trains go by. To stand under the bridge and hear the sound of the trains crossing. That's all we wanted to do. That's it... I was in a party dress. We had this freshman's party and we were just taking a detour. They (the police) just came. "So you are taking advantage of this girl and you are prostituting for them". And I said we were just coming from a party at our institute. And they were like "your institute allows you to have parties at this hour". "It was a freshman's party other institutes have that too". But they don't want to understand the situation. They want to take the worst of it. Without any concrete proof how can you throw these accusations and be so mean and harsh about it? I mean try to get your facts together. Then they took us to the police station and harassed us, kept us there for three hours...just seated. They just kept on saying, one policeman after another. They would not shut up.

Like "how are you dressed?" It was not like I was.... I was wearing a knee length dress. I mean a dress that is up to my knees, it is not above my knees or something! It was not *exposing* anything, and I was wearing dark coloured stockings... I mean don't people wear dresses, shorts, sarees? I was completely covered. It was just my hands that were bare. Even then I was wearing a shrug. They just saw what they wanted to see.

Someone from college came and talked to them. He wrote a letter, said "I have all these

contacts". Called up lots of people. It was a lot of drama. They called the hostel office, checked our id cards. We had already shown them our ids. They were just not ready to believe anything. Then my friend came, two or three other people came and I think because of his contacts they were a little scared. It was really good that he was there. For the guys with me it was really funny. In the beginning it was scary but later they laughed it off. For them it was funny that I was accused of being a minor and one of them a pimp, while the other, a client. For me, it was like total disbelief... What the hell are you thinking? Can't you see our faces? Don't children from universities exist in this universe? Can only prostitutes and pimps exist?

(Excerpt from interviews conducted between 2013-14)

There have been concentrated state efforts towards making urban centres into educational, professional hubs. This process, alongside the struggle for education and autonomy from within various social movements has aided increased migration of minorities, particularly women, to city spaces for jobs and education, in search of freedom and social mobility. Often, their gendered engagement with and visibility in urban public spaces is overshadowed by concerns for protection (Fester: 2005). The production and performance of the sexualized body in the city both reconstitutes female embodiment, and genders the city topography. This process delineates places of belonging and non-belonging through which female conduct is governed. For women who visit pubs, this experience of urban life is marked by the chaos and threat of the city on one hand, and the freedom and pleasure of the pub on the other. Urban sexuality for these women is constituted through this dialectic of the exclusive space of middle class leisure that is the pub, and the 'public' space of the city.

'Pub-going women' is a term that has gained some popularity in recent years as financial autonomy and liberalization have enabled the entry of middle class women into the leisure economy. The pub is often constructed

as a liminal space, even as it is saturated in the pleasure economy of liberal capitalist enterprise, often functioning as a modern day ritualistic space for heterosociality. Liminality could be understood as a threshold that straddles both norm and margin—offering perspectives or modes of being not available in everyday life¹—in this case, to dance, drink, or dress provocatively, performing in ways that question and challenge the construct of femininity in public spaces where the demand is often to be ‘demure and modest’. In order to understand female embodiment and leisure in urban public spaces, I have juxtaposed the normalized liminality of the pub in contrast with the expectations of public life in the city, where women often encounter harassment, or even assault for their attire and conduct.

“I don’t feel restricted in pubs I feel free to wear what I like and not worry whether people will look”

“Only in clubs, campuses, malls I see but otherwise I don’t see women wear what they like and be comfortable.”

“We tend to go in groups. Two people may not, one definitely won’t. *The more, the merrier but it is actually the more, the more safe you feel.* When you are standing on the road waiting for the cab to come even those moments are really nervous. All the people walking by just spy on you. *you are all dressed, you will go and trash the place, you are like skanks.*”

(Excerpts from interviews conducted between 2013-14)

Clubs or disco-pubs are sustained by a permissiveness that is prohibited by the normalizing forces of urban public space. Urban city life is marked by separations;

belonging and non-belonging are constantly mediated by these walls. Clubs grant an illusion, a polarization with the norms of the city that allows for the existence of pleasure ensconced in legitimized social structures. They are architectural enclosures of permitted transgression, one whose illusory liminality



allows for the sustenance of the norm outside its spatial boundaries, a subversion that reiterates even more firmly the structure it purportedly subverts. Ladies Night, a themed night that provides alcohol free of charge to women, reiterates the masculinist performance of these spaces. Not only are

free drinks a way to attract the ‘paying’ male crowd, perceived by these clubs as financially capable individuals, the very idea that women are provided free drinks anthropomorphically reiterates the club as ‘gentleman-provider’. Surveillance here is made explicit, not only through bartenders that often limit the consumption of alcohol per women for safety concerns, but also the presence of cameras and bouncers (male personnel employed to ‘regulate’ club revelry).

The female body in the metropolis, on the other hand, is governed by self-surveillance. The entry of single women into the metropolis, either from smaller towns, or other metropolitan spaces, allows for sexual reconstitution with respect to the spatial difference of cities. Not only do women reorient their behaviour to the city, they sculpt the topography of the city into a cartographical construct of their experiences, often rooted in community affiliations and linked to perceptions of biological/social vulnerability. These are further shaped by the structural bias against singlehood that defines their experience of the city and increased vulnerability to violence in city-spaces. These techniques of self-surveillance as protection are sustained by the repressive albatross of punishment that coaxes an embodied performance of femininity in urban spaces.

As Foucault has pointed out, surveillance, that had a direct, menacing presence prior to what

could be safely termed as ‘modernity’ has undergone a semantic, even ontological shift from the beginning of 18th century Europe with the transformation of power as discursive, embodied knowledge (Foucault, 1975). This shift entails that mechanisms of control are often internalized, as Foucault

¹The term was proposed by Arnold Van Gennep and later taken up by performance studies, particularly Victor Turner to describe theatre space. Van Gennep used it to distinguish the transition period between ‘reality’ and trance states in tribal rituals. Contemporary usage of the term broadens its possibilities by exploring various states that pass from the fabric of everydayness into novelty and non-ordinariness that are also located in the everyday, though exceed it. The argument remains whether institutionalized and legitimized experiences such as that of the nightclub would be considered liminal- even though its habitus is quite unlike that of everyday life.

writes using the architectural metaphor of the Panopticon:

the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers (Foucault, 1975)

The internalized gaze embedded within the social contract, a silent yet ubiquitous social agreement bound by values of the self/other. The idea of self-surveillance is central to the functioning of modern society; orienting, constituting and engineering ideal subjectivity. In the Foucauldian premise power in modern societies "...reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives" (Foucault 1980,30). Our bodies are discursively constituted through internalized forms of control. The city, with its myriad spatial differences, legitimized and sub-cultural spaces of leisure and the anonymity of subjects to one another, holds out new and unimagined potential for transgression and for subjective reconstitution for single women, yet these are constrained by the spatial organization of urban life and subjectivity. Transgression of the city's spatial organization contaminates and threatens patriarchal boundaries of conduct. It grants community the agency to employ corrective mechanisms, either morphed in subtle ways by the family, or in the case of single women, friendly neighbourhood aunt/uncle, strangers, police sometimes culminating in explicit physical, sexual or psychological violence and violation.

To understand this better, we return to the narratives in the beginning of the text. The two narratives contrast and contradict each other, but they are very much two sides of the same coin, to use a clichéd expression. If in the first narrative, navigation of city-space before entrance into the club highlights inventive techniques of self-protection:

travelling in groups, covering one's body with shrugs, jackets or dupattas, techniques embedded in the perceptive reorganization of conduct in city-spaces. The second narrative opens the register of 'masculinist ownership' within the metropolis, the non-belonging of the female body in city-space, where regulation of her conduct is defined by time/place, clothing and company. The experience of women in clubs is a counter to such incidents where we are expected to "be stylish", "look fashionable". If clothing legitimizes the body, marking its intelligibility in and compatibility to the conduct of spaces, thus delineating the body's place in the social structure, our experiences between the regulation of public space and the equally sexist, yet contradictory demands of club spaces means that urban femininity is performed through an unstable yet socially recognizable code of sexuality in urban space. The reversal between the space of the club and the city often means that for women who visit this space, the enactment of femininity in urban spaces is marked by navigating respectability in the city and the need to 'dress up' in the club, indicating the two extremes of performative possibilities for women in and as urban publics. Her conduct in public and demeanour in pubs are both subject to social scrutiny.

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Contents

- Editorial
- Charting a History: Women's Organizations across Three Campuses in Hyderabad - Annu Rasheed and Madhumeta Sinha
- Sexual Harassment Committees: Treading the Murky Waters of Intersectionality - K.C. Bindu
- Gender and the Academia - K. Suresha Rani
- Equality on All Fronts - Salma Ahmed Farooqui
- Mums in our midst - Mirpo Madhuri
- Dalit women in Omania University hostels - B. Saranamma in conversation with A. Suresha
- Reflections on the condition of dalit women on university campuses - Sowjanya
- Excerpts From "Women's Students Forum: A Trajectory" - Rekha Pappa
- Heterosexuality and Sexual Violence - Samir Vasa
- Gendered Violence and the Hall of Mirrors - Parul Chatterjee
- Towards more inclusive initiatives for gender sensitization: a critical reflection on the functioning of Students for a Gender Sensitive UoH - Anu K. Antony & Greenha Justin John
- Notes on Some Expressions of 'Concern for Gender Justice' - Chandra S
- Untouchable Rage - Chellappalli Suresha Rani
- Alisamma women's collective manifesto
- Identity Card - S. Anjali
- SAMVAD - (Excerpt from note about its goals and objectives)
- A 'Conversation' between a Daughter and a Mother - Lella Ganam and Gita Ramaswamy
- Midnight March- Hyderabad Report - Maranatha Wahlang and Tejaswini
- Messaging Harassment - Janani
- Naga Students in Hyderabad and Campus Politics - Eluka Asami
- Invisible and Harassed: Perspectives of a Visually Impaired Woman - Deepa Shanmugasundaram



Women walk the night!

This image was on the invitation issued for the Midnight March on Jan 8, 2013. It was borrowed from the internet representation of a poster used in the UoH for a 'Women Walk the Night' event. Graciously reproduced here.

- Revisiting Koch Koch Hata Hai - Anjali Panthulu
- What makes a man or woman on campus? Reviewing the stakes of desirability, agency, and power in the movies *Sye* (2004) and *Happy Days* (2007) - Nimisha
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Contents

EDITORIAL

REGION

This is My Protest Katiji
Building my Identity... - Jyotsna Subhadra
Language Breathes Life into Telangana Songcetti
Srinivas
Telangana, Language and Cinema Sathya Prakash
E and Vamsi V

POLITICS

Dalits and English K. Rajah
English Dalit Goddesses Chandra Bhan Prasad
Language Issues Jayashir Tharmalarasu
Gurram Joshua DM Inaguralad
Sanskrit-Mother Tongues Sonnyu Dechamma

URDU

Hyderabad Medical School Syed Musatappa Kamal
Persian Given Place to Urdu Tariq Rahman
From OUI to MANUU: M.A. Moid
Interview with Jamid Zakir
Interview with Khalid Sayed
English Language at Madrasa Sajida Sultana
Problems of Urdu at MANUU M.A. Moid
DEMOCRACY AND STANDARDIZATION
Interview with Vamsi Yelliah N. Manohar Reddy
& R. Srivastava

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Beyond Standard Language - D. Vasantha
'Chera': An unfinished task K. Srinivas
Language, Political Commons Madhava Prasad

DALIT LITERATURE

Venema and Joshua Katti Padma Rao
Language Flow in Modern Telugu Dalit Literature Goga Shyamala
Mother Tongue in Diaspora Prasen
Language and Lifeworlds Deepu Srinivas
Succorwords and Dalit Poetry Jhalara Srinivas
Holy Shit: Book Review R. Srivastava
Gautha's gaze on Gramyam N. Manohar Reddy

TRANSLATION

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4 No place for the obscene

Debates on *Playboy* Club in South Asia

Pranoo Deshraj and Pushpesh Kumar

If you're a man between the ages of 18 and 80, *Playboy* is meant for you.

If you like your entertainment served up with humor, sophistication and spice,

Playboy will become a very special favorite. We want to make it clear from the very start, we aren't a 'family magazine.' If you're somebody's sister, wife, or mother-in-law and picked us up by mistake, please pass us along to the man in your life and get back to your Ladies Home Companion.

Playboy Magazine's first issue dated December 1953 (quoted in Gunelius 2009: 15)

The environment and atmosphere we are creating are women friendly...It's not a male bastion, spouses are more than welcome.

Sanjay Gupta on the launch on *Playboy* Club in India (quoted in *Reuters* article 2013)¹

The *Playboy* Club was inaugurated on August 9, 2014 at the Park Hotel, Hyderabad, India. The entry of this popular American erotic entertainment industry that had begun with magazines and expanded to chic clubs in the local market was seen, at one level, as an open embrace of the sexual revolution heralded under neoliberal conditions and on another, as a continuation of the exploitation of women's bodies under the capitalist regime. The news of its launch was circulated in popular media and across the internet with ironic mirth, with various websites reporting the launch of the club unanimously quoting the extant laws on obscenity, under which the sale of the magazines is prohibited. On the *Playboy* website, the promotional campaign celebrates it as 'a reward to the high fliers of the nightlife' where the young, urban middle class could be served by 'a mysterious woman at the bar...making your drink'.² Many groups in the states of Goa and Telangana (where the construction was proposed) opposed the club, including groups as divided as political leaders, feminist, progressive and religious right organizations.

At the heart of this debate was the repudiation of erotica as obscene (by the club promoters and opposition alike) in service of the national culture.

The entire event was telecast on media. Among the pro-ban group, the sentiment was that erotic commerce and sex work were terrible for women and conversely for the nation, the anti-ban group argued that the club will maintain Indian sensibilities and provide family-friendly glamour. The promoters insisted on framing the club as a lifestyle product that was against nudity or obscenity and instead provided tasteful glamour that integrated Western and Indian sensibilities. As Matthew Nordby, the senior executive VP and chief revenue officer of *Playboy Enterprises*, declares: 'The goal was being respectful of Indian culture'.³

This debate provides an interesting point of reference for addressing questions of sexuality and censorship under contemporary conditions that pull together the seemingly opposed forces of the liberal and the conservative. This tussle has been observed with great interest among contemporary scholars (Burt 1994; Holquist 1994; Thompson, 1997; Post 1998; Moore 2013). On the one hand, liberalism as the commodification of the female form has made itself more apparent, yet it has been observed that in the south Asian public culture, the display of female bodies is regarded as inherently pornographic and to be excluded (John 1998; John and Nair 1998; Bose 2006; Ghosh 2006). This sense of the private that surrounds the female body extends to the imagination of the nation as a feminine power, *Bharat Mata*, that must be protected (Jha 2004). Nationalism is often imagined as the act of protecting this corporeal, feminized nation (Davis 1993). The regulation of, and reservations against, these commodified bodies thus presents a challenge for feminist politics that finds itself in the tricky position of siding with the repression of female bodies by its comparison of nudity and sexuality as vulgarity, obscenity and disrespect toward women. They function as acts of censure, regulating and curtailing the possibilities of the female body concomitant with quests of nationalist fervor that equate the body of the woman with that of the nation. Obscenity is yoked together with ideas of nationhood and national, communal assertions (Gupta 2005). Debates such as these also remind us of the fluid, and combatant nature of public space, where culture is a 'site of struggle' that is constantly in the process of becoming (Niranjana et al. 1993). Contestations of culture are channeled through the body of the censored. The censored and censorship need to be understood not as mechanisms of repression, but as performative and discursive sites of ideological production. (Butler 1997). Censorship in this sense extends to subtle maneuvers of language and acts of speaking that seek to fix the meaning of the object of censure – either for cultural validation or repudiation. In this chapter, we suggest that the groups based their reservations and promotion on the disavowal of the sensual and the libidinal as antithetical to national culture.⁴ We explore the two ends of the debate to suggest that both of these positions invariably collapse and contain women's sexuality in the name of the nation.

Toward the end of this controversy, a police ordinance banned the employment of women by the club, and set twenty other conditions upon which the club's license was contingent, including a ban on 'obscene gestures', dances and visual representation.⁵ Simultaneous with this crackdown on obscenity, the police also arrested members of *Bharatiya Jana Yuva Morcha* and *Hindu Jana Jagruti Samiti* (henceforth BYJM and HJS, respectively) for creating public nuisance and dismantling property at the Hyderabad venue during the *Playboy* Club launch party.⁶ These apparently contradictory moves are taken up in this chapter as enunciations of the limits of sexuality as legitimized by the state. They are also indicative of the state's navigation of the conundrum between global consumption practices that counter nationalist values and the need to sustain those values.

The chapter begins with an introduction to the debates on obscenity in Indian public cultures to help us think through the further sections on the brand's strategies to abate moral anxieties and the critique mounted by the protests. We conclude by suggesting the need to complicate the polemics of sexuality in public cultures.

Sexuality in public culture

The restructuring of economic policies in the 1990s had a monumental impact on the structure of the middle classes and greatly affected the production and circulation of sexuality in India. It was a moment of significant change in the history of 'Indian capital...(that) emphasized free enterprise, removal of licensing and control, and gradual opening up of the economy' (Das 2011). The growth of the middle classes has been linked to new forms and patterns of consumption that dislodged austere notions of development and consumption in favor of consumerism (Fernandes 2006; Oza 2012). The nationalist austere citizen-subject of development has been revived as the 'cosmopolitan consumer' (Deshpande 1993). This is also evident in the proliferation of urban leisure spaces. The number of pubs, cafes and leisure spaces catering to the urban youth has grown exponentially in the past few years (Robinson 2014). From 2000 alone, a number of new players have entered the market and pubs, which before the 1990s were primarily exclusive and elite spaces, have since become a significant part of the urban experience in cities for the middle class. The past decade has seen a proliferation of pubs in urban centers, and lifestyle supplements such as *Times Nightlife* which lists the burgeoning number of pubs in major cities. *Playboy's* decision to launch in India with its emphasis on consumption and leisure for the middle classes is an extension of this economic and cultural shift.

Liberalization also marked a threshold moment in the public cultures of sexuality. From the lifting of the 'prohibition around kissing' in cinema (Prasad 1999) to an increased leniency toward erotic labor such as bar dancing, the post-1990s moment dynamically reconsidered questions of sexuality, obscenity and the public space. While on the one hand, several incidents have served as stark reminders of the pervasiveness of moral policing and other forms of regulating erotica in public life such as calls for ban, or protests

under the guise of upholding cultural values, contemporary 'public culture' (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995) has also seen bodies on display in an unprecedented way. The recent debates on 'non-heteronormative public sexuality' (Tambe and Tambe 2013; see also Kapur 2006) on dressing and transgression are part of the shifting attitudes of gender among the middle classes and the conflicts to which they give rise in the public domain. The launch of the clubs is part of this shift in the sexual landscape. The opening up of the market to increased privatization had unforeseen consequences for our sexualities – they were seen as at once liberated from the discursive constraints of tradition, but also reconfigured under emerging social conditions (Mani 2014; Lukose 2009).⁷ For feminist scholars researching the global South, there is a constant conflict between nationalist and liberal reactions to globalization with varying effects on sexuality (Mani *ibid*; Menon 2004).

Discussions on sexuality are never neutral or objective. A discourse, sexuality is 'the result of a signifying practice' engendered by a representational system (Hall 1997). Mazzarella and Kaur suggest that it is regulation that 'stages the contradictions of South Asian public culture in a period of effervescent consumerism and resurgent religious nationalism' (2009). Their definition of regulation as a 'set of generalized practices' that are in turn 'productive, affective and performative' (*ibid*), rather than paternalistic, external commandments, echoes John and Nair's seminal assertion that sexuality is productive and not merely repressive (2000). It is often presented as a battle between neoliberal femininity embodied by freedom/choice and the market versus the 'moral panics' (Weeks, quoted in Bose 2006) informing nationalist constructs of womanhood embodied as culture and tradition. The 'disturbing configurations of dominant culture' (Tharu and Niranjana 1994) which saw the coming together of the religious right and women's activist groups to protest 'public obscenity' is evidence of how sexuality and neoliberal globalization function in complex ways in South Asia. As Kapur (2014) reminds us, 'regulatory practice...produces and effaces the body it governs'. They are instances of 'constitutive foreclosure', defined by Butler as 'that primary scene in which the formation of the subject is tied to the circumscribed production of the domain of the speakable' (1997: 139). What surfaces is that any attempt to limit and define sexuality effectively produces its meanings and modes of its governing. Instances of regulation, even well-intentioned feminist responses to globalization, confront the dilemma of producing the abjection of the subject they seek to protect.

'The challenge' for feminist scholars is

the working out of a different space for a radical politics of culture, one that is differentiated from both right and left-wing articulations of cultural and economic nationalism, as well as from the libertarian and celebratory responses to globalization from the consuming elites
(Menon 2005).

In this chapter, we attempt to find just such a space of radical discontent.

Section I: there will be no nudity: the *Playboy* campaign

The *Playboy* magazine has been synonymous with erotica since its inception in the US around 1960 (Gunelius 2009). Over the years, the brand has extended its business to clubs, beer gardens, etc., attracting intensive ire from various social groups (Pitzulo 2011). The launch of the club in India is part of its growing need for diversification and expansion as the magazine comes under onslaught in the US for its portrayal of sexually explicit imagery of women. The strategies used by the enterprise to 'suit Indian sensibilities' and the insistence of the club to disavow nudity and obscene in favor of 'Indian values' indicates the brand's denial of its eroticism to adapt to the local market. Practices of globalization are increasingly recognized as 'de-centered' which means that commodities are often dislodged from a place or even ideology of origin (Harvey 1989). The 'central paradox of globalization' (ibid) reconfigures the nation as a product of global exchange but it does not erase its territorial and cultural links with the nation (Oza 2001). This debate is part of a long-standing debate in globalization that addresses global practices, often seen to be hegemonic practices that led to a dissolution of territorial cultural forms. Alternate models propose that contemporary cultures are borne out of a fusion or simultaneity of local and global forms, also known as 'glocal' cultures. Bose and Bhattacharya, for instance, write that contemporary cultural practices 'emerge out of confrontations with each other' (2007). Nations continue to assert an ideological and symbolic presence within the discourse of globalization. To make space within the Indian market, the brand thus focuses on an alternative set of associations – leisure practices of the elite and the urban youth. This is only possible if the brand distances itself from its associations with pornography and sexuality, instead appealing to the aspirations of the middle class. The brand executive, Sanjay Gupta, emphatically states that 'There will be absolutely no nudity',⁸ rather the brand will be 'dissociated from adult content'⁹ 'positioned around lifestyle, aspiration and glamour'.¹⁰ This is reiterated by Parag Sanghvi, the Managing Director of *Playboy* enterprises in the country, in his statement. The advertising for the club focused on glamour as the selling point of the club, disavowing erotica. In an interview prior to the launch of the club, the then-ambassador Sanjay Gupta declares to the media that:

PB Lifestyle will strictly abide by the law of the land and will respect local traditions. As stated earlier, PB Lifestyle is not associated with the nudity element of *Playboy* magazines. PB Lifestyle is a separate entity from *Playboy* Enterprises. We are collaborating to bring *Playboy* into India in the retail, lifestyle and hospitality industries. Everything in India will be done within the purview of the prevailing laws¹¹

This constant refrain to abide by the 'law of the land', which ostensibly refers to the laws pertaining to obscenity, indicates a system of laws that are

not governed by legalist concerns as much as by an unwritten code which deems what is appropriate in public space and what is not. It can safely be assumed that the 'bunny' as a sensual, provocative figure has no room in these codes of public culture. This is reflected in the changes the brand made to fit the local market.

In a newspaper article on the promotional campaign, the author makes a distinction between risqué and demure bunnies. He is alluding to the company's proposed model for the Indian 'bunny' (Shekhar 2014). The *Playboy* 'bunny'¹² is part of the enterprise's strategy to cater to its primarily male audience. Begun as a men's magazine, the earlier versions of *Playboy* are best known for their centerfold nudes featuring the 'bunny' of the month. From the days of its inception, 'profitable provocation' (Mazzarella and Kaur *ibid*) has been the defining feature of the brand. While this mingling of pleasure and economy is by no means new, this chapter is far more interested in the brand's attempts to repackage erotic pleasure and class entertainment. Barring minor confusion, the initial campaign for the country declared that it would include the bunny as she is 'integral' to the magazine's culture, albeit in a manner suitable for local population. The enterprise sought to do this by modifying the original bunny costume, a body suit, ears and a fluffy tail to a variant of the sari – a long flowing, sheer skirt and bodice. It stated that 'For the obvious reasons of Indian morality and sensibilities, we can't follow the traditional costumes that *Playboy* bunnies are associated with'.¹³ This was a first in the brand's history. It has never had to review its clothing to suit local cultural needs.

The campaign proclaims the dress 'is a celebration of India's rich culture and the Americana of the classic *Playboy* Bunny Costume'.¹⁴ Described as 'chic and conservative', the dress is an important statement on what constitutes 'India's culture'. By modifying the 'traditional cleavage-bearing costume' to an 'allusion to the sari', the brand testifies the reputation and imagination of contemporary Indian culture in a globalizing world. Manikonda, the designer of the new *Playboy* outfit, states: 'I wasn't sure how to work around the hip exposure that is iconic to the American Bunny costume...I knew that the hip had to be covered, so I developed concepts that addressed the *questionable* (italics ours) area while still allowing an illusion of exposure'. This play between exposure and covering up is resolved by the sari, which has earned the reputation of representing the nation (Wilton 2012). The sari also allows for a further disavowal of the bunny's sexuality by presenting her in an iconic, conservative garment.

The disavowal of obscenity and concomitant debates around 'ideal' and 'non-ideal' sexuality are also expressed in the brand's insistence that the club will be a family place. It is repeatedly asserted that the club will not entertain any nudity and will instead be 'wife-friendly' as one article puts it.¹⁵ This analogy indicates the divide between acceptable and non-acceptable sexuality. It marks the difference between the dangerous, threatening sexuality of the bunny and the contained, normative sexuality of the wife. The wife is a symbol of domesticated purity, and her

presence suggests the family nature of the space. The comparison harmonizes liberal entertainment with nationalist moral aspirations and the containment of sexuality under the aegis of conjugality. Through such maneuvers, *Playboy* attempts to manage consumption and seduction by promoting itself as a space for both the recuperation of the nation and the middle-class family.

The club is part of a growing market for urban leisure practices centered around the youth and the middle classes. The middle-class Indian has been the much-touted figure of consumerism and neo-liberalization in India (Fernandes 2006; Bronsius 2010; Mazzarella n.d.). It is this class to which Fernandes refers to as 'a distinctive social and political identity that both represents and lays claim to the benefits of liberalization' (p. xviii). The middle class has also been instrumental in the growth and transformations of our consumptive practices. The 'cosmopolitan consumer', is a phenomenon of the nation-state's evolving liberalization policies (Deshpande 1993). Simultaneous to the accession of the middle class has been that of the youth as consumers in post-liberalization India. The youth has become a double metonym for 'fun and danger'; they are 'irresponsibly, even stupidly mimetic...the failure (of interpellation) produces actions that are linked to danger but also...fun' (Chowdhari 2009: 131, brackets ours). The youth also represents a not yet-rational public. When the protests against the club grew, the protestors claimed that the club was like a sweet which if offered to children, they would readily eat. This indicates the infantilization of the public to be regulated. The protestors also claim that the youth are 'lured into its (club's) trap by attractive women and find themselves unable to come out of it'.¹⁶ In the debates on regulation and prohibition of the club, the youth represent the misleading potentials of liberalization. 'Youth' is not merely a cultural or sociological grouping based on age, it is a symbol of the new public in a new era. Ritty Lukose, painting a gendered image of liberalization's economic and cultural impact, suggests that like the post-partition's midnight children, the children born after the 1990s represent an epistemic shift, a new generation whom she terms 'liberalization's children' (Lukose 2009). This population becomes the 'index' of the cultural impact of this economic shift (Lukose 2009), the primary marker by which the success and impact of liberalization can be measured. Sana Mahesh Babu, the owner of the Hyderabad franchise, corroborates this in his declaration that:

Hyderabad is a young and dynamic city and the brand *Playboy* goes with it completely. I think this deal will open a new chapter in Hyderabad's younger culture. *Playboy* has given quite a few things to the style and fashion of this world, we are planning to bring all of that within the reach of the people of Hyderabad...Looking at the increasing style quotient in Hyderabad, we are sure that the merchandise would be well received by the public.... I believe this would create a new chapter in the way Hyderabad hangs out.¹⁷

The proposed consumer of the club thus has three primary features. He is most likely young, glamorous, and, as the advertisement at the beginning of this article indicates, male. At the same time, the campaign negates the bunny's sensuality by declaring it unacceptable. Her sensuality is made abject by this denial and the process of substituting her risqué image for a more demure, acceptable image.

The club eventually received a warm, quiet welcome in Goa as *Sunset Ashram*, a popular resort without any female employees.¹⁸ In the next section, we focus on the protests against the club and its idea of the nation as antithetical to *Playboy* sexuality.

Section II: nation under threat: protection from obscenity

The club was first proposed in Goa and this is where the dissent first made itself felt. It was initially due to open as a beach shack co-owned by Congress MLA Angelo Fernandes as per the property laws governing Goa. The issue caused an uproar in the parliament when Calangute BJP MLA Michael Lobo threatened to go on a hunger strike in opposition to the club. Stating that the club was against local cultures and Indian culture in particular, he demanded the immediate withdrawal of the club from the state.¹⁹ The Goa Tourism minister Dilip Parulekar, in a statement exactly reminiscent of *Playboy* India's stance linking nudity with obscenity and permissibility with culture declared that 'we will not allow anyone who is here to spread obscenity and nudity'. The club then shifted base to Hyderabad where news reports on its opening stressed on the *manduva* and *maguvalu* (women and liquor) culture of the club. (*Andhra Jyothi* 2014) This highlights an important contention in south Asian anti-obscenity campaigns. Often, demands for the prohibition of obscenity become demands for the control and protection of women from unwanted, anti-social elements. In a nation where the state's investment in curtailing sexuality and keeping women's bodies as private is of utmost importance, demands for increased censorship only exacerbate the exercise of power over women's bodies. They foreclose the undefined possibility of bringing sexuality out in the open by seeking to limit it and are indicative of a failure to engage with 'risk' (Bose 2006).

All India Mahila Congress Committee (AIMCC) President Anita Verma's states that, 'The concept like *Playboy* club will not work for the state of Goa'.²⁰ Local women's rights organizations such as *Bailancho Saad*, and other right affiliated organizations such as HJS (which was also active in Hyderabad), vehemently opposed the club. Auda Viegas, chief of *Bailancho Ekvott* (Women Together) expresses her concern at the lack of regulatory mechanisms to check on the club:

Goa's latest aim is to invite all things which are anti-social and bad for society. This club is banned everywhere. What system do we have in place to check what's going on inside the club? We have not been able to check places like dance bars, pubs, events organised by outsiders in

Goa where women are trafficked It's not fair (sic) that *Playboy* Club is allowed in Goa.²¹

The club became an important political issue linking the failure of the state to protect women with what should or should not be allowed as an 'obscene' practice becoming a crucial debating point. The conflation of female nudity with obscenity, and thereby exclusion from the public space and public cultures, becomes stark in the position of the Hindu right.

HJS in a public letter (posted on their website) invokes Goa's 'vedic' heritage, by comparing an imagined glorious Hindu past with the 'kalyug' (dark ages) of the present – in this sense, they echo the response of Hyderabad's newspapers which equate the club with the evils of 'wine and women'. They write:

Goa is known as Parshurambhumi, is a land of temples and known for its rich cultural heritage... Starting of such a club will further add insult to injury and degrade the holy Goan state raising questions on moral values of civilised Goan people...will re-enforce the maligned image of Goa internationally....In the Hindu Dharma the real wealth of a woman is her chastity and nudity means the destruction of her chastity... The *BJP is committed to preservation and protection of Indian Culture and tradition*. Allowing setting up of club like 'PB Lifestyle will be just contradiction of the same. The Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (HJS) strongly requests you to oppose the starting of such a club in Goa and not give permission for the same but *take action under the Indian Laws on Obscenity and safeguard the respect and dignity of Goa and the Goans*. (italics ours).²²

There were two primary grounds for opposition to the club. The first of these, which is also tackled by the brand, is that the club is seen to be antithetical to Indian culture. The second question, raised by feminists linked the club's strategies to promote prostitution and declared both to be detrimental to the rights of women.²³

We find the same apprehensions in Hyderabad after the proposal for the club to be moved to the city was made public. Mohan Gowd, the convener for HJS highlighted Hugh Hefner's statement that bunnies were 'fresh animals, young, vivacious, sexy' and suggested that its promotion of nudity cannot be tolerated. He also added that, 'This will boost perversity and further encourage rapists. Hence HJS demands that the government should give priority to teach the ideal of Bharatiya culture and morality by not granting permission to the *Playboy* Club'.²⁴ Sandhya from Progressive Women's Organization corroborates this when she suggests that, 'In the western countries, there are not many attacks on women, but in India, attacks are happening with and without them'.²⁵ The *Mahila* (women's) representative for BJP, Varalaxmi, suggested that *Playboy* should be renamed 'dirty boy'. On the same panel, POW claims that the club was a 'filthy, derogatory' display of *laingikhimsa* (sexual violence), a 'bacchanalian culture' that exploited women as 'servants to men'.²⁶

Feminist engagement with the topic has delineated how the argument for protection of culture made by the political right is distinct from the demand for equal rights. This distinction is important, but fails at the level of implementation. The image of women as dutiful wives and daughters is equally troubling to gender politics since it disregards or fails to implicate the derogatory portrayal and treatment of women in popular culture (Bose 2000). Secondly, such an approach often elides over its own role in sustaining the status quo as it constitutes and limits the possibility of eroticism whereby any display of sexuality becomes a seditious act that threatens the coherence of an abstinent 'national culture' and threatens women's autonomy. Such an approach also ends up demanding the protection of women from the state thereby reinstating the paternalistic and patriarchal relationship of the state to its women.

A growing body of work on south Asian sexuality attests to the disavowal of obscenity in favor of a monolithic and fixed notion of 'tradition' as the structuring principle of difference.²⁷ Public culture in south Asia has been defined by the exclusion of female bodily display as pornographic and obscene. As this debate takes shape, the discussion surrounding women's profession and the club's launch pivots a number of concerns regarding liberalization. Central to these concerns is the framing of the dichotomies of East/West and tradition/modernity that implicate women's bodies as the ground on which these issues are debated. As the controversy's take on the West and East indicates, the process of self-definition is founded on difference. Even when it is not tradition that is at stake, the enduring 'fact of difference' is etched onto the modern imaginary. The disavowal of obscenity in favor of a monolithic and fixed notion of 'tradition' becomes a key component in the difference between the East and the West. This is expressed by the pro-ban group in the city of Hyderabad in a more localized manner with reference to the new Telangana state and the people's desires for the new state. (see Kondanda-ram 2007 for a brief overview of the state) In the talk show referred to above, the launch of the club is spoken of as a 'humiliation to the state of Telangana akin to the humiliation of its history under Andhra Pradesh'. Panelists also claim that the permission given to the club was an act that 'humiliates and degrades women'. They add that, 'if we want to protect women's rights and respect, it should not be allowed'.²⁸ This association of humiliation and 'evil' with *Playboy* which is a constant refrain in feminist debates only heightens the problem of carving out a space of positive sexuality. By associating erotica with such connotations, these groups further marginalize sexuality as bad. When news reports discuss the *ardhanangalu* (half-naked) and the *asamgika* (anti-social) they, as Ratna Kapur suggests, 'reinforce the idea that sex is *dirty* and women's bodies are *dirty*' (2014: 229). The news reports on *Playboy* reiterate that the club represents *asililata* (obscenity) in the form of *nangasahayakulu* (literally: nude waitresses).²⁹ The outcome of such a position is that it only denies the voices of the women claiming the multitudinous nature of sexuality; these moral reservations collapse bodily display and exploitation without consideration

for questions of women's autonomy, right to sexual labor, and further align themselves with trenchant dominant positions of cultural authenticity and preservation.

This, of course, raises a further question on the nature of neoliberalism and globalization in the country and its mounting critique. Can we, in this case, deny the objectification of women's bodies and the commodification of pleasure for the male as consumers? For the well-intentioned feminist critique, the contention is not just women's rights, but also the emergence of a 'capitalistic patriarchy'³⁰ that is strengthened by global exchanges, and suppresses the rights of women. What is to be noted here is that the critique of globalization is often directed at the cultural threat it poses, rather than the economic (Rege 2002). It fails to address questions of the feminization of labor and other deeply disturbing economic processes, and the socio-political, environmental damage that is central to the expansion of capital. Further, such a critique of neoliberalism assumes neoliberalism to be an economic, market-led individuated shift rather than a deep-rooted mode of governance that is now embodied by the state; its functions are seen at the level of singular actions rather than how they affect the entirety of social organization. Such loosely applied terms indicate the complexities in developing a feminist critique of obscenity in the current national and global scenario.

Conclusion

There are two approaches to the question of representation and regulation that are involved in discussions on obscenity. The first of these has received wide attention, which is how bodies are represented and how the obscene fails or succeeds in delivering on its promise of incitement. Another way in which obscenity can be considered is closer to Butler's notion of 'constitutive foreclosure' which demands a closer look at the performative functions of law or extra-judicial institutions and how they frame obscenity, what mechanisms they use to mark the obscene and how they justify its exclusion from the public sphere. This brings us to a second mode of thinking about the representation of obscenity, which is to consider how public actors seek to represent the obscene while excluding it. How do they engage in a performance of self-representation and othering of the obscene and on what grounds? It refers to 'the problem of speaking *for* others' (Alcoff 1991). It highlights the 'crisis of representation' where it is the words we use and the meanings that we give to our subjects that constitute their definition and erase other possible meanings (ibid). Our engagement with the obscene is troubled similarly with a constant need to speak for the other and represent its otherness that only defines and fixes the meanings of a fluid, nebulous terrain of sexuality and social processes to declare its exclusionary status. Our subjects become abject by our very act of representing them. By denying the complexity of the subject's engagement with and within structures and instead rooting for the downfall of partial structural oppression, we deny these subjects the right to livelihood, sexuality

and expressive autonomy. The question of obscenity can then be reframed as a question not of rights, which implies a willful or oppressed subject, but of structures that produce this discourse. As Foucault suggests, 'One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework' (1978, p. 115 quoted in Hall 1997). It is then left to us to ask if our sexual politics mimics and reproduces the same oppressive definitions that it seeks so hard to counter.

Notes

- 1 Shilpa Jamkhandikar. 'Playboy to miss date with sun-kissed Indian state'. *Reuters*. April 2013. Accessed June 2016.
- 2 *Playboy India*. 'The Bunnies are Here'. *Playboy Website*. n.d. Accessed July 2016.
- 3 Seetharaman, G. 'Playboy unveils Indian Bunny'. *Business Today*. December 2012. Accessed April 2016.
- 4 The terms 'pro-ban' and 'anti-ban' have been used loosely to describe the parties in the controversy. As the chapter will unravel, there are many overlaps and points of antagonisms within the said groups.
- 5 The Hindu. 'Additional conditions imposed on "Playboy Club"'. *The Hindu*, 13 August 2014. Accessed October 2016. See Also Hindu Jagriti Samiti, 'Success of Hindus: Cyberabad Police Chief's death blow to the Playboy Club in Hyderabad'. August 13, 2014. Accessed January 2017.
- 6 Shekhar, Saye. 'How moral police spoiled the party'. *First Post*, August 10, 2014. Accessed October 2016.
- 7 The 'Pink Chaddi' campaign in Bangalore that evolved as a response to the attack by right wing members on women for being seen at the pub (now infamously known as the 'Mangalore Pub incident') was one of many such conflicts that highlight the failure of reconciling the 'traditional', often constructed, understandings of gender roles with current cultural practices. See Kapur (2014) on the politics of 'Slutwalk' and protests against gendered violence in the country.
- 8 Hsu, Tiffany. 'Playboy club to open in India- but no nudity allowed'. *LA Times*, November 2, 2012. Accessed July 2016.
- 9 Vasant, Khushita. 'Bunny Hop: Playboy Comes to India'. *The Wall Street Journal Blog*, November 2, 2012. Accessed August 2016.
- 10 Staff Reporter. 'Playboy Club to debut in India but magazine still banned'. *CBS News*, November 2, 2012. Accessed June 2016.
- 11 Kurian(a), Augustin, 'Playboy Club comes to Hyd'. (*sic*) *The Hans India*. August 7, 2014. Accessed June 2016. See <http://www.thehansindia.com/posts/index/Telangana/2014-08-07/Playboy-Club-comes-to-Hyd/104313>
- 12 It is difficult, if not possible, to define this term without encountering a whole set of problems but since it must be done for the convenience of the reader, here it is: 'Bunny' is the term used to refer to the waitresses employed by the company, the models that feature in its magazines are also referred to as such. They embody the iconic symbol of the brand – a bunny, which is reiterated through their costumes – a swimwear styled bodysuit, with rabbit ears and a fluffy tail. Hugh Hefner famously declared that the bunny 'has a sexual meaning... because it's a fresh animal, shy, vivacious, jumping – sexy. First, it smells you, then it escapes, then it comes back, and you feel like caressing it, playing with it. A girl resembles a bunny. Joyful, joking.' (1967, *Playboy Magazine* interview in Gunelius, 2009) of the intense criticisms that the brand has received from feminists has been over the employment of these women (Pitzulo 2011).

- 13 Staff Reporter. 'First Playboy Club set to open in Goa'. *The Telegraph*, November 2012. Accessed June 2016.
- 14 Bhushan, Nyan. 'Playboy India bunny costumes revealed'. *Hollywood Reporter*, December 22, 2012. Accessed June 2016.
- 15 Gupta, Prachi. "Playboy Coming to India as an 'Aspirational Lifestyle Brand'". *Salon*. November 2012. Accessed August 2016.
- 16 CVR Women's Window, 2014, "Playboy Pub Culture in Hyderabad Part 1-4, Youtube. *CVR Telugu News* August 30 2014. Accessed June 2016.
- 17 Kurian (b), Augustin, 'Hotel does it Hush Hush!'. *The Hans India*, August 8, 2014. Accessed June 2016.
- 18 Staff reporter. 'PB Lifestyle Ltd organised an opening party over the launch of its new beach club in Goa'. January 2014. Accessed December 2016.
- 19 PTL. 'Goa congress plays safe for now on "Playboy Club" issue'. *Hindu Business Line*, April 2013. Accessed June 2017.
- 20 Hindu Business Line *ibid*.
- 21 Economic Times, 'Playboy Club will be shutdown if found indulging in Nudity'. *Economic Times*, November 2, 2012. Accessed April 2016.
- 22 Solanki Manoj. 'Letter to Goa CM by HJS regarding cancellation of permission to "Playboy Club"'. Hindu Jagruti Samiti Web. n.d. Accessed January 2017.
- 23 This is a question that has emerged before on discussions surrounding the Bangalore Miss Universe Pageant in 1994. See John and Nair (2000) for a discussion on how the differences and similarities between feminist and religious right positions impact sexuality in the country. Also see Oza (2001) for an extensive analysis of the Pageant.
- 24 Kurian (b) *ibid*.
- 25 One must remember that this debate takes place just around the vehement protests surrounding the now infamous Delhi gang-rape case in 2014. Many of these apprehensions are thus affective call to arms that seek to provoke the memory of that wound.
- 26 CVR *ibid*.
- 27 See Prasad (1999) and Niranjana and Dhareshwar (1993). Also see Bose (2000) for an extensive discussion on how the 'nationalist resolution' on women meant that women's sexuality became an embodiment and extension of anxieties of the nation and its culture. She draws on Partha Chatterjee's seminal work (1989) to develop her argument.
- 28 CVR *ibid*.
- 29 Staff Reporter. 'Playboy club in Hyderabad opening today'. Trans from Telugu. *Andhra Jyoti*, August 9, 2014. Accessed June 2017.
- 30 CVR *ibid*.

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February 27th, 2020

Certificate of Paper Presentation

With this letter we confirm that *Pranoo Deshraj* participated at our conferences 'Groove the City – Urban Music Policies between Informal Networks and Institutional Governance' from 22nd -24th of November, 2018 and 'Groove the City 2020 – Constructing and Deconstructing Urban Spaces Through Music' from February 13th to 15th, 2020.

We also confirm that Ms. Deshraj presented a paper during each of the two events:

At 'Groove the City – Urban Music Policies between Informal Networks and Institutional Governance' she did a presentation about 'Sex and Sound in Bombay City: Aural Pleasure and Anxiety in Filmi Disco'.

At 'Groove the City 2020 – Constructing and Deconstructing Urban Spaces Through Music' she presented her paper 'Masculinity at the Margins: The 'Gully' in the Metropolis' during the session '*Music as Space of (Gender-)Identities*' on Febr. 14th, 2020

Sincerely



Dr. Robin Kuchar
– On behalf of the Organizing Committee –



International Seminar

1-3 November, 2017

POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

Singing Woman, Lucknow, 1870s

KEYNOTE ADDRESS: PROF. SUKANTA CHAUDHURI

(Professor Emeritus, Jadavpur University)

INVITED SPEAKERS:

Prof. Don Adams (Florida Atlantic University),

Prof. Anuradha D. Needham (Oberlin College, Ohio),

Prof. Sajal Nag (Assam University),

Prof. Saugata Bhaduri (Jawaharlal Nehru University),

INVITED SPEAKERS:

Prof. Simi Malhotra (Jamia Milia Islamia),

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Prof. Amit Bhattacharya (Gour Banga University)

VALEDICTORY ADDRESS: PROF. CHANDRAKALA PADIA

(Banaras Hindu University, & Chairperson, IIAS Shimla)

Certificate

This is to certify that Pranee Deshraju, Research Scholar
of Centre for Women's Studies, University of Hyderabad
~~participated/ delivered the keynote address/ valedictory address/ plenary lecture/ chaired a session/ presented~~
a paper titled Spaces of Play and Excess: Framing the Nightclub in
the Cinematic City
in the Three-Day International Seminar "Politics of Representation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives" organised
by the Department of English, Sikkim University in collaboration with HRDD, Government of Sikkim from
the 1st to the 3rd of November 2017.

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